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A COSSACK LOVER

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A
COSSACK LOVER

BY
MARTHA GILBERT DICKINSON BIANCHI

1
*Author of "Within the Hedge," "The Cathedral,"
"A Modern Prometheus," "The Cuckoo's
Nest," "Russian Lyrics and
Cossack Songs," etc.*



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1911

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Dedicated to the gallant Cossack
To whom I owe an imperishable impression of his race,
N. P. N.

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A COSSACK LOVER

L'AMOUR

*Pourquoi dit-on de toi, ô sentiment trompeur, que tu es
le plus précieux des dons du ciel?*

*Toujours tu nous apportes des tourments et des peines
après un court bonheur, après quelques instants de
joie!*

*O sentiment variable, ennemi du repos, tu vagabondes
dans le coeur humain, en te jouant de lui, tu
l'inondes de chagrins, de douleurs!*

*Chacun te craint et te recherche. Tu es la grande
mystère de notre vie!*

From the Georgian of *Akéki Zaretelli*.

A COSSACK LOVER

CHAPTER I

AN EMBASSY BALL

THE ball was given by the French Ambassador. It serves no point to describe it, for it was no less brilliant, no more memorable, than hundreds of its kind had been at various other Embassies in London in seasons past, or than others would be in the seasons yet to come. It was not destined to remain sole standard for future balls, nor forever associated by thrilling political events in its rather tedious train. It was, I suppose, like average balls to the general observer; only remarkable to a few individuals for personal reasons, quite undeclared to the rest of the world. At this Ambassador's ball, certainly, there were the same smiling, tiara-crowned women, the usual complement of men ranging from the peerage to the diplomatic corps, mingled with uncounted foreigners displaying their variegated decorations on high-coloured uniforms. There were also the sleek shoulders of the dancing men, whose faces appear in London ballrooms during the season, as punctiliously and sometimes, be it whispered, as nameless as the stars in the nightly crowded heavens. The flowers drooping in the heat were like those that had drooped and died for pleasure's sake the night before, and cut from the same stalks as those budding to die to-morrow night in the bright cause of Society. In the supper rooms, the same florid men and

stout matrons ate delightedly, and paused to pledge each other's gout in forbidden wines, unmindful of ensuing pangs. In the ballroom, débutantes, held close against immaculate shirt fronts of the King's latest decree, revelled in the incommunicably enchanting atmosphere of make-believe love and rapture; a harmless mock of passion, less wearing upon the complexion than real emotion, and less provocative of scandal than the subtler forms of the game played by the married sisters in more occult corners. Outside, on their perches the same cabbies slept. The courtyard as usual was full to overflowing of yawning footmen. The motors and coaches were standing in a queue as endless and inextricable as ever. The same beggars shivered in the raw spring night, waiting in the hope of a chance to slam a carriage door or restore some fallen stick or glove to its owner for a ha'penny when the "quality" went home, at last!

Something of all this feeling was in the heart of a girl who was standing by one of the ballroom doors that led out into a less crowded corridor. She was chatting between dances with Lord Gore and a young Russian diplomat, at the moment rather conspicuous in his country's political manipulations.

Plainly she was an American, for her colour heightened or sank away with her change of moods, instead of retaining the stolid, healthful glow of the English maiden, or those steadfast carmine patches of the Continental beauty. She was pronouncedly blonde, but in a warm, gusty fashion of her own. Her eyes were like golden pools in the heart of an autumnal wood. The mouth was exquisitely sensitive in curve, the lip imperious, but with a slight fulness that betrayed latent

powers of the sense. Her sun-kissed hair, which some of her compatriots had called her Declaration of Independence, she wore knotted so low that it served to relieve the soft shoulder line as well as the fragile throat. One could imagine its burnished mass to blame for weighting the dainty head and tilting the chin at its characteristic angle of rebellion. Her gown to-night was of satin, golden in hue. Her choice of it had seemed to her conventional aunt odd to the point of being compromising of her maidenhood, but remonstrance had been of no avail. The effect was odd and wondrous too, worn without jewel or ornament except for a long golden coil about the waist, such as Egyptian women wear; a souvenir of the winter in Cairo. She was not tall, answering well to the measure Orlando set upon his Love—

“Just as high as my heart”—

A Hotspur at heart, perhaps she was, however. Both men by her side were compelled to stoop a trifle to catch her voice above the blare of the dance music. It were wise fewer women had outgrown this pretty necessity, since the lords of creation love the notion of stooping to the eternal feminine, and women confessedly are sweeter with an uplifted glance.. Nathalie Mainwaring's glance was too keen for blandishment or affectation. The Englishman at her side found her spirit delightful. The Russian appreciated her beauty, and associated her with the friendship of his wife, in some vague but cordial relation.

“How was it that I did not meet you last season?” Lord Gore was asking her now. “We must have been about at no end of places together.”

She ignored the compliment of implied regret with a matter-of-fact answer.

"I danced miles last season, and that was all I cared about any one! All men were merely partners to me. It sounds indiscriminate, does it not?" remembering, as she spoke, that Lord Gore did not dance. "I was very young last season," she added hastily. "I could not understand why any one who did not dance came to a ball!"

"You thought balls meant dancing only?" the Englishman queried.

"Why, yes—does not every one suppose so?——"

"Oh, dear no!" objected Lord Gore. "People come for a thousand different reasons. Love and scandal come, and elbow each other, each for its own reason. Fatigue and ambition play out their game under cover of the band. There are desperate mothers who come because they dare not let the season slip by with Gladys or Gwendolen still unprovided for. There are men who come because their presence or absence might serve almost as a pretext for the interruption of international relations"—he glanced at the Russian beside her as he said this, with evident implication. The diplomat sighed sympathetically.

"Ah, if you indeed thought we all went to balls for dancing, you must have been young last year—ravishingly young!" he exclaimed.

"A modern Eve," assented Lord Gore, "unaware that her Eden was only good to lose!"

"There are still many people here to be accounted for," she insisted, glancing about her at the shifting multitude.

"There are those who come to forget—and those who

hope to remember," said Lord Gore gravely. "Also others who come because they are bidden, and they fear not to be, next time, if they allow themselves a dereliction. A few happy people go for personal reasons—because *He* will be there—or because *She* has promised to come! Most of us do not know why we come—until we meet you"—his face was oddly attractive when he smiled, as he was smiling down upon her now. He was not a man of remarkable height, but carriage added to his actual inches. Perhaps his greatest charm was a certain gracious gravity, that lent his regular features a chastened serenity rarely found in the face of one no older than he. Too thoroughbred to carry a gloomy front into society, he could not escape the romance which universally invested him with a broken heart and a deathless fidelity to his dead bride. Nathalie interrupted the silence, that had momentarily fallen, by a bright nod toward the ballroom. "And after all some of us do come to dance—" she reminded him. "I still believe in my first idea a little, for I see my next partner on his way."

"If that is all you require of men in a ballroom, we must retreat," admitted the Russian. "I do not waltz or even *deux temps*, but may I be permitted to take you back to braver men who do? Permit me"—and he offered his arm with a deep bow.

The girl shook her head with a shrug of indifference.

"That was last season," she said. "I am older now, and very tired of it all."

"And my wife has told me you were perfectly Anglicised and loyal to a fault!" he cried with amusement. "How little you women know one another!"

"On the contrary, I am reactionary and revolutionary," she said earnestly.

His face betrayed no aversion to that word, just then so malign of import to Russian interests, but he turned the direction of their chat immediately by saying: "The English have accomplished wonders. They deserve their glory and your applause."

It was banal, but it served. Her bright, restless glance roved over the crowded rooms, as if seeking and unsatisfied. Brilliant uniforms, decorated broadcloth, all the polished display of London's golden youth; none of it availed her, it would seem.

Lord Gore noted her discontent. "They displease you—why?" he asked quickly.

"These men ought to go out and die for their country," she replied.

"But, my dear lady, if they all died for their country, the object of such wholesale heroism would cease to exist," he urged half quizzically. "The stability and order of England, not to speak of her sources of power, exist right here in London; at the heart of things. A few of us must remain alive, to keep the wheels running. You are a bit of a fanatic in your hero worship, are you not?"

"No man is a hero in a ballroom," suggested the Russian.

"I am tired of it just for that reason," said Nathalie frankly. "These men may all have heroic stuff in them, but I am never allowed to see it. I never see anything vital. The blood of my Puritan ancestors, who killed Indians and braved famine, breaks out in me now and then. I am not subtle, I am terribly sensational. I want things to happen! I want to help make them hap-

pen. I am out of place here, where everything was finished hundreds of years ago, and I am going to run away some day. I want to starve for a cause!"

The eyes of the Russian kindled splendidly.

"Meantime, have an ice, do, now!" interpolated Lord Gore, stopping a servant as he passed them, tray in hand. "Tell us what sort of a good time do you like—if all this sort of thing bores you"—he urged, as he carefully selected the daintiest *mêthe frappé* for himself.

She looked up over her harlequin ice with a merry smile for the clear-cut Englishman with his prematurely silvering hair. "I want to hold the arrows while my husband shoots savages—or hide the children in a secret passage, as my own great-great-grandmother did," she announced.

"You will have to marry a soldier for such adventures. You might go out and try a *kopje* in Africa for a start—but there are soldiers right here in London," Lord Gore admitted.

"I should like a 'bobby' who holds up the cabs in Trafalgar Square better than one of those figureheads that sit all day with a fountain of horse hair falling down the back, guarding a peaceful doorway in the heart of the town! And I should hate one of those petticoated Warders that guard the Tower from tourists—even a Beef-eater seems a peaceful being without ambition."

She was distinctly out of tune. Instinctively these men of many worlds who stood beside her offered her the mental platitude of supposing a love affair gone awry—that first aid to the imagination, when a pretty woman cries for any sort of moon and cannot be appeased by flattery or diamonds. To these onlookers, Hilary Blount, her cousin, not far away, presented the

key to her disenchantment—Hilary, slim, correct, elegant, with a supercilious eyebrow for any newcomer, his complacent full lips, and an arm rather too easily lent to the service of women. The girl's eyes followed their glances and read them correctly without a trace of embarrassment.

"No, it is not Hilary," she contradicted aloud.

Both men started guiltily.

"Hilary does not weight in my balances at all, either way, up or down"—she imitated a scale with her outstretched hands as she spoke. "I want a man worthy of my steel! Hilary is a swordless sheath—incomparable in design. Nobody has any right over me, nobody can force me to do anything against my will, and I have decided it finally and sacredly, I shall never marry Hilary!"

"Did you want me, dear?" asked that person, approaching at the sound of his name. Hilary always called her dear in public—to his mind it stamped their relation beyond recall. She made a gesture of dissent and he returned to his own partner, only stopping to caution her, with intimate solicitude, against the draught in the passages. The Russian covered the retreating figure with his glance.

"He is of a distinguished personality—your cousin," he remarked; "aristocratic, next even to his father's title. That is supposed to weigh heavily with your country women."

Lord Gore listened for her reply with some interest.

"Marry Hilary!" she scoffed gaily, "I should exactly as soon think of marrying Lady Blount's butler, Wallingford! He is a social functionary in his way, so is Hilary! One wears knee breeches, one wears the uniform

of society, but both obey; neither would dare an initiative."

The object of her revolt was already waltzing slowly away with a rather too well-known beauty, indisputably his senior. For Hilary Blount was still young enough to prefer women older than himself. This is a mark of youth. Age is known by its creeping preference for increasing juvenility in its amours. Before either man at her side could spring to the defence of the absent, a new incident had arisen to blot him from the minds of all three. A woman was crossing to them; a woman dark and winning, and entirely unconcerned by the conflicting currents that opposed her progress. She paused to take an outstretched hand here, to exchange a few words of greeting there. Instinctively all men bowed as she passed, and the Russian Ambassador remained with head inclined in her honour, until the crowd had closed between them. Madame Melyukof was a familiar figure to most of the London world. Nathalie's face cleared instantly as she recognised her friend, whose youngest sister was the wife of the Russian Secretary of War to England, that moment by her side.

"I am indeed happy to find you, Little One," she began in her rich, full tones, laying her hand fondly on the girl's shoulder. And in spite of her outward calm it was plain to the heart that loved her, that there was a note of unusual excitement vibrating within the low voice. "My holiday with my Wanda is over, dear. I am going from London almost at once."

A sharp reaction of unhappiness swept over the girl's face. "Going? But you have just come! What does it mean?" she cried.

"I have this very minute a telegram from my baby

brother. He informs me of the mobilisation of my husband's regiment. They are ordered to the far East. I shall go to the front with them as a Red Cross nurse, a volunteer, of course. I hoped to have time to send for you to-morrow, but I shall be so hurried, and the number of people to be seen make the task so insurmountable, and there are also always the endless number of last things to be accomplished—" she broke off helplessly.

"Catherine! Are you really going?" Nathalie repeated. "My best friend in England!" There was unbelief in the calamity on her face, but her words ended in a half sob.

"Where his regiment goes, his wife goes after," said Madame Melyukof fondly. Her pride in her dead husband she was at no pains to conceal.

A vision of London bereft of this inspiring intimacy, this creature of ideals, this soul that responded to her own vivid longings, subdued the girl. She could not speak. It was Lord Gore who said, "Surely, Madame, you will not hazard that long journey with your country at war, and conditions of travel necessarily so unsettled in consequence?"

Catherine looked at him reproachfully. "Ah, but it is just then that the nurse is most necessary!" she reminded him gently.

"But even for such an acknowledged patriot, there is work here equally important," he urged, "funds to be established, bazaars to be organised, and all that sort of thing——"

"All of which my little sister Wanda may do perfectly," she assented, adding with a shrewd shrug, "if she is convinced that the funds will not be diverted to the

giving of dinners or bejewelling of cocottes, by those who have the privilege of forwarding them to the front where they will be sadly needed." There was a touch of bitterness in her voice, but she smiled again as she concluded, "Myself, I will be my own emissary of the little aid it is in my power to give. I will carry healing where it is possible, and where it is too late I will give assurance of the holy religion I profess. A few less shall die without the blessed ikon before their eyes, because a woman was near them to fold their hands in eternal peace."

It was strange conversation for a ballroom. So impressive was her personality, that while the band sighed over them in strains of moonlit gardens and stolen kisses, her listeners saw only in imagination those distant fields of actual war and death, moved by the earnestness and sincerity of the woman's heart. The Russian Ambassador, who had followed her, half worshipful, half warning, remembered other Russian women equally devoted, equally calm in legitimate service or the hurling of bombs. The soul of Russian women was ardent. Their use or abuse of power depended solely upon the direction of their impulse, he well knew. This one could be trusted again; had been trusted in the past more than once. He moved, or rather he melted away, from the vicinity of the little group without remark, the respectful expression his face had worn significantly deepening.

Nathalie Mainwaring was thrilling with a sudden purpose that must have been already existent and needed only a call to lift it from the darkness of unborn impulse; sacrifice being ever the true appeal to feminine instinct. "Take me with you, Catherine!" she cried now, without reflection. "My own country needs no patriots. It

has dollars instead of heroes! Let me go and help you! I will not be in the way. I will obey you like any common soldier. Only keep me near you!"

This was reaction, revolution indeed. Lord Gore excused himself to pick up the fallen fan of a passing dowager and stopped to congratulate her on the perfection of her daughter's toilet.

Although their thoughts were far away, the eyes of both women he had just left followed him idly.

"A sad pity his wife died!" sighed Catherine with compassion. "She was a sweet child."

"I admire him very much," confessed Nathalie, "only he is so——"

"Every woman would have been the better for having married him," said Catherine. Then their eyes met and resumed their interrupted theme. Those of Nathalie entreated, those of Catherine could not involuntarily refuse.

"Have you the least idea what you are asking?" the older woman said slowly.

"More. I mean it."

"Then come!" with a gesture of protection and love sweeping as it was solemn. Again their eyes met, flashed, softened and held close. They could speak no more in words, for the crowd surged about them, and women fair as these could not hope to find solitude among a multitude of eager men.

"To-morrow at nine, then," Catherine said as they parted a few minutes later; one to her carriage outside, the war office and a sleepless night of intelligent activity, the other to the ballroom and a round of impatient partners.

"To-morrow at nine!"

It was an unusual tryst for the favourite of a London season to ponder with a burning heart and quickened breathing. As Nathalie danced on she was mating the circling, gliding motion of her body with the intricate undercurrents of her brain. This sudden move of hers would involve domestic struggle, even civil war perhaps. But she was determined she would go to Russia with Catherine if she had to let herself out of the great house in Park Lane like a housemaid in disgrace! The season was really yet before her. Endless repetitions of satin-clad ennui, like this to-night, awaited her. Broadcloth inanity and respectable imitation love and heartless offers of marriage were the most she could plausibly hope for here. Russia smote her imagination as brass stuns and claims the ear. Nobility of nature, sacrifice, devotion as impersonated by her best beloved Catherine, the general's intrepid widow, called her to chivalrous deeds. To live, and to live grandly in heroic measures, were the watchwords of her inspiration. Methodically now she dismissed her glowing sentiment and set herself to thinking out her plan of campaign against her reluctant relations, with whom she had lived most of her orphaned life. This she did with so much success, that although her step never faltered or lost the rhythm of the seductive waltz time or the nervous *deux temps* making irresistible appeal to her responsive feet, she was prepared to approach her uncle and guardian next morning as one merely disclosing the perfected plan for a journey long premeditated.

In the stately dining-room of the aristocratic mansion of his ancestors Sir James Blount was seriously taking his morning coffee, preliminary to his early ride in the

Row, prescribed by certain eminent physicians as imperative for his unimpaired preservation. His niece found him as usual attended by the passive Wallingford and his own man, Watson. Between these two there existed a tacit feud as to the food their master ate and the drink their master drank. True, Watson was quite capable of indulging the patient on the quiet, as occasion might demand, but he rated Wallingford soundly for allowing any relaxation in the stern pursuance of medical orders, thereby doubly securing the good will of Sir James. It was the daily habit of the master to appear within the orbit of these twin functionaries at precisely a quarter to nine, and when seated in the handsome empty room, directly beneath the portrait of his own remotest ancestor, to enjoy the undisturbed possession of his own importance. This was a fixed daily habit. And next to himself Sir James Blount loved a habit. He was a florid sixty or more, portentous concerning trifles, though easily allowing matters of importance to escape him. To him his own ends were so sure that he often tripped over the means, and gave the goal to others through his overweening self-confidence. In the hunting field, for example, he had been known to back his own instinct at a crossroad against the scent of a trained pack, only to find himself surveying the kill off some neighbouring height while he cursed the folly of the Master of Hounds in choosing a dirty ditch below for the tragic arena! In chess, too, he saw his own moves cleverly enough, but failed to allow for those of his adversary, resenting the ultimate checkmate as if no piece upon the board but his own was entitled legitimately to thwart him. His niece often beat him, because he persisted in playing as if conducting the game alone. This policy he preserved

throughout his household and business affairs. He employed, or deployed, his wife, his son, his servants, his friends as inanimate figures akin to his own carved ivory chess men. But thus far Nathalie had declined the moves he had indicated for her. The single rôle of the queen did not suffice her. She preferred to diagonal back and forth or to remain obstinate as a pawn, or even leap over obstacles, which, as every chess player knows, is only permitted to the knights. Her disposition to oppose he had steadily refused to recognise, but in all his commanding, assertive, domineering, satisfied life Sir James Blount had never encountered her like in womankind.

As he watched Watson pour the cream into his tea, he was inwardly congratulating himself on the astuteness of his policy in allowing his niece to tire herself out on the general society of the London season, before he shut her up to the companionship of his only son in the restricted intimacy of a country house without guests. There Hilary was bound to shine, both for lack of rivals and through his real gift for the squiring of dames. Furthermore, reasoned Sir James, was it not juxtaposition that made marriages? And if Hilary alone was permitted to juxtapose—was not the result inevitable? It had become his habit to think of his son and his ward united. Cousin or no cousin, he intended them to marry, and marry soon. He saw no reason why they should not marry gratefully, and he saw a number of excellent reasons why he should encourage the departure from precedent and overlook the obstacle of their existing relationship. Nothing had arisen to thwart his plans, and Sir James this morning was well content with his world and his own manipulation of it. When Nathalie broke in upon his

matins, he felt another touch of enjoyment had merely been added to the hour. He noticed that she was not clad in her habit with some regret. She was not in her usual filmy attire either, associated in his mind with pretty women and the auroral hour, but correctly turned out in the plainest of tailor frocks, betokening business rather than pleasure.

She seated herself in the chair next his own and, declining the overtures of Wallingford, plunged at once into her project. She disclosed her plan as one long meditated; approaching him as an ally, giving him her most confident assurance of his sympathy; eyes bright, colour courageous; appealing to him against them all, just as he liked best to have her.

She was well aware that it was his best hour in the twenty-four, and the only one in which delay and prolonged discussion would not suit his book. She glanced at the clock to assure herself there were but five minutes for the attack and surrender, and something told her it would be enough. For the surreptitious disappearance of Watson had not been swift enough to deceive her quick young glance, and the empty Scotch glass, that even Wallingford had not perceived, betrayed the cause of the moment's geniality. Sir James complimented her upon her fresh appearance and ate a plum with heightened relish. He was alive yet to the charm of a pretty woman, and enjoyed it, as he enjoyed all the pleasant things he provided for himself. They exchanged a brisk fire of dialogue as to the ball, the weather, the lateness of the mail, and when she came to her request for his consent to her travelling arrangements, he realised that he had scarcely listened to what she had been saying, in his preoccupation with her spark-

ling youth and the general satisfaction of a painless morning without his gout lurking to destroy or forcibly racking in his nether limbs. He would have disdained to admit the gracious influence of the contraband Scotch, of course.

"Visit Madame Melyukof? Where? When? Here, or out of town?" he demanded, hardly aware of her full intention at first, for the sweetness of her lips. When the scheme was revealed in its entire enormity he frowned, but it was not an altogether thwarting frown. Nathalie remembered, thankfully, that she was after all her Aunt Netta's niece. Uncle James might make it nasty for her, but he could not absolutely prevent. Her aunt would never have the courage to forbid her doing anything that was in the range of human probabilities and not intrinsically wicked. So she continued to set forth her plans with a gay assumption of his co-operation.

"You know, Uncle James, you are a man—and you know how nervous Aunt Netta is in the morning," she began.

"I ought to!" groaned Sir James.

"And you know how she hates discussion!" Sir James admitted that he certainly did. "So I thought, rather than have any fuss about it," continued Nathalie, smiling like a twin conspirator, "I would just assume that you and I had settled everything between ourselves, to save her annoyance of thinking things out, don't you see? And that you agreed with me perfectly that it would be fine for me to see something of Russia with Catherine. Aunt Netta would never think of opposing anything you had decided upon. I am not nervous, any more than you are, but I do hate to put Aunt Netta off

into an attack; it is liable to last several days and make everybody uncomfortable who is not in the least to blame. If I tell her first she will be sure to think you won't like it, so I want to tell her that you approve of it, and make it easier for us all."

In spite of her plausibility, Sir James looked dubious, though not unsympathetic. He was not averse to getting Nathalie out of the way for a little. His son lost ground with his suit. Gossip spoke above a whisper of him lately, too, in another quarter. The season's tide was sure to toss up many a more avaricious suitor than his well-bred Hilary. One could never say what a girl would do. Moreover, as Madame la Generale was a public figure, there was no loss of caste involved.

"So you want to go out and have a look at those barbarians on the frontier, that eat with their fingers and grunt instead of talking, do you?" he asked.

"That is not a literal translation of what I want, but it will do," she said, laughing good-naturedly.

"They will send your dainty ladyship back flying, with a heightened appreciation of the luxury of home and the delicate attentions of civilised Englishmen."

"Then you can come out and get me—" she began.

"I might send Hilary—he would be a good contrast," he suggested, not without calculation.

The morning was fine. Outside the grey cob stamped impatiently. It was Sir James's habit to mount at exactly nine. He glanced at the clock as if defying it to put him behind. After all, it was not such a bad idea perhaps. Some girls would bolt with a lover if they disliked the touch of the yoke, even that of the parental will. He must drive her without a whip, even if he made a pretence of carrying one. Should he let her go?

The clock struck reproachfully, nay, accusingly. He rose with a carefully disguised effort, not wishing to reveal his gouty dread of motion, and gave the consent unreservedly.

"Go, of course, if you want to. Who is going to hinder you, I should like to know? Tell your aunt if she raises the least opposition that there is no use trying to influence me in the matter. I have made up my mind. I shall listen to no silly horrors or lamentations."

All aglow with relief and happiness, Nathalie followed him into the hall. "I knew it! I knew you would be glad to help me get away from all this stupid round you never go in for yourself," she cried.

As he picked up his crop he turned back. "But," he said threateningly, "but, young woman, if you get your way in this I suppose it is in the running that I get mine by-and-by, eh?"

It was a portly attempt at finesse, which she disregarded by kissing him flatly, before the solemn Watson, who never left his master's side of late, and who vented his sense of impropriety at being party to the action by turning his back the moment it was over and Sir James had taken the outstretched hat he was offering.

"You can have your way forever after, if you let me go out to Russia with Catherine first!" she exclaimed.

"Well, well, don't talk to your aunt about it. She is nervous about a number of worries of late. And, I say, speak a decent word about your coming back to Hilary, will you? We have no legal right over you—as yet," he added, with an attempt at archness. "Don't stop on with those savages after it bores you! No place like home when you get far enough away from it, eh?"

He went down the steps with only a slight favouring of the vicious left leg, that made each descent an effort, and swung himself up on his grey cob, Lady Jane Grey, by Duke of Wellington, conscious of a slight sense of relief and a dazzling recollection of the freshness of her kiss.

After all, this was better than her wanting his consent to a marriage. "If it had been a lover," thought Sir James, "how devilish ticklish it might have been for us all just now. Her money must be induced to remain in the family. Hilary was an idiot not to have snared his bird hard and fast by this time. What short work he himself would have made of it thirty years ago! Had, in fact; pity the money had not lasted as well as the nervous American constitution he had included in its possession. If his Janet had been strong, Hilary would have inherited more in the way of brawn; "more ginger, so to speak." And so on, indefinitely, with if and if, and never a self-condemnation for money lost or spent, until the motion of the grey and the cool, delicious air upon his face gave him the spirit of a sporting Squire of twenty. The memory of Nathalie's fleeting caress recurred to him pleasantly. What a girl she was! She had discarded a doll and demanded a live dog of him. She had scorned games and preferred to hunt. Now she was flouting society, and cried out for reality! "If she had a bad figure," said Sir James to himself, "but Diana couldn't shame her, dam'me if she could!" How often he had heard Lady Janet say fretfully that her hair was her fortune, even without her inheritance her future would secure. . . . if only she would consent to wear it properly! "Needs a knowing hand," confided Sir James to the grey. "Deuced pity men capa-

ble of managing her are haltered elsewhere; dam'me if it isn't!" And he pulled himself higher in the saddle, as if to give his waist-line more of a chance and cheat his appearance of the last twenty years.

CHAPTER II

RUSSIAN WHITE NIGHT

IT WAS not until Nathalie, standing by Catherine's side in the vast Zoölogical Garden Station in Berlin, saw the train for Warsaw actually thunder in that a first pang of realisation seized upon her. It was daylight still, though the great clock pointed to close before nine in the evening. The sudden misgiving was lost in the necessary business of departure, only to recur as she saw the friendly familiar German street scenes fall away behind the train and the German country-side gradually fade into the summer night. A sudden faint suggestion of exile blew over her heart like a damp wind springing up at evening after a golden day.

Russia! The word kept sleep from her eyes; danced before her like tossing flags, ran through her veins electrically. Association rioted with hope and terror. Her reversion to natural emotions and primal conditions craved stimulant, the more barbaric the better! Her reaction from the placid conditions left behind her in Park Lane set her nerves tingling for any vivid adventure. Let it come in the form of desperate daring or reckless loving—only let life wake and call her from this monotony of existence! Her excitement heightened until the train came to a standstill at Alexandrowo. It was two o'clock and already it was dawn. The birds were calling. The Russian white night was over and her first day on Russian soil begun. She knew nothing

of the countless tragedies of a Russian frontier town; of the threat and lure held by those gleaming rails over which the train had slipped so smoothly, so plausible to those the Government permits to come and go, so deadly to the poor wretch who attempts that gleaming path without the imperial permission. A crucial moment to others, fraught with life and death, to her it was simply a captivating scene. The white bloused soldiers hurried by the windows, taking their orders with perfect military precision from the formal officials, whose bearing was elegant and punctilious, as if in the discharge of a court function. Even the poorer travellers, with their corded luggage and foreign-looking children, were engrossing.

Madame Melyukof was of course well known, and a few words to the superb inspector of passports insured them every attention, including a rapid survey of their luggage that left them free to stroll about as they pleased. Nathalie watched the face of the inspector as he read her own passport. It seemed to be a most serious matter. She was distinctly relieved at the close to have him glance up at her with a magnificent salute, and smiling broadly, exclaim:

“Ah ha! Americanski!”

He then broke into a dramatic chat with Catherine, as full of interpretive gesture, compliment, modulation of voice as had the scene been laid in a London drawing-room instead of a sleeping coach on the homeless stretches of the frontier. She felt then, what she was often afterward to realise, that a Russian can speak an unknown tongue in a manner to include the uncomprehending listener. She knew instinctively, after a few mutual questions and rapid answers, that they spoke of

her. It seemed that the official said something amusing, for Catherine smiled roguishly. Then she appeared to be on the defensive, and he, in turn, made some explanation. Catherine looked regretful and the officer laughed at her discomfiture. Remembering Nathalie, she began to walk briskly, dismissing him to his duties with a word of thanks.

It seemed she was disappointed not to find her brother here to meet her. She had confidently expected him, and he had failed her for the first time.

"What has happened? He must be here!" she exclaimed as she looked in vain among the light grey coats of the officers, white-gloved and gleamingly besabred. "Something must have detained him," she murmured at intervals. "He always comes to the frontier line to meet me when I am entering our country again."

Even the train from Warsaw gliding in, a few minutes late, failed to bring him, though his sister's breath came short with eagerness and one might have believed her waiting for her lover, instead of the little brother of her adoration. Nathalie shared her emotions to a lesser degree, throwing herself into every phase of the new experience without reserve. She was not really chagrined, however, as Catherine undoubtedly was, and after their own train had resumed its way she forgot his existence as she strained her wakeful eyes over the flat, endless stretches of country, trying to determine whether it really looked Russian, or if its sombre expression was only the result of her personal preconception of what Russian scenery ought to look like. She half expected to see Siberian wastes before the train was more than out of sight of the German empire! For several hours their progress was only halted by the rare stops at some

unimportant town or lonely village. At Warsaw again the brother proved delinquent, but as they stepped from the train his personal soldier was in waiting with a carriage and a note for Catherine; presumably excusing his own non-appearance. She smiled as she read it, then frowned. But to Nathalie she spoke vaguely of the inconvenience of the hour, as if exonerating the culprit without explanation.

It was seven o'clock in the morning. The Faubourg Cracovie was scarcely astir. As they were driven in an open carriage through the half-awakened city to their hotel Nathalie had opportunity to notice the arresting statue of Napoleon before they were fairly under way. After they were in motion she could notice nothing but the driving. The pace was a mad one. Among others equally insane, their droschky coachman snarled and unsnarled, pranced and flew! The horses slid on the smooth wooden pavement like roller skaters on a polished floor. She shut her eyes, too bewildered to pray for safety, too dazed to watch their own demolition. They were being run away with, of course. She felt she was to be killed here and now, in her first hour of Russia. She resisted her impulse to scream or jump after a glance at Catherine's undisturbed face. One horse seemed to be down and another about to be fatally pierced by an approaching shaft, unable to avoid it in their own crazy speed of attack. Again she closed her eyes. When she opened them it was to find everything disentangled and smiling, their furious pace unabated, but now slipping among the crowd unhindered. A little farther on Catherine pointed out the iron gates of the Potocka palace, just as they turned sharply to the left and tore through a side street, around a corner, and

came to a dramatic full stop before the open door, above which one read in immense gold letters that swung and shimmered in a quiver of welcome, *BRUHLOWSKI*.

It was a long, low hostelry, directly opposite the Saxon gardens. The driver cracked his whip like the rattle of musketry, and from the interior servants, porters, clerks and the proprietor rushed pell-mell, while a babel of respect and cordiality ensued. Madame la Generale was aristocracy and military combined. Either would have afforded her the best service the house could yield. To be one or the other is, in Russia, indispensable. Madame was happily both, and no millionaire American could, for an instant, jostle her supremacy. Money is dear, for Russian living costs two roubles to a dollar, but title savours of empire, and to it the oppressed bow, though their oppression be a thing of lost ages.

"You will need sleep, dear child," she said to Nathalie, as she left her after a hasty inspection of the rooms to assure herself that they had been comfortably prepared.

"Sleep?" echoed Nathalie. "I feel, on the contrary, as if I had just waked up!"

"Try to rest," begged Catherine: "No one shall be permitted to disturb you. Your windows open on the balcony with mine, but only our suite commands them. You need not dread intrusion. I will lock your door on the inside and you need have no fear. Your own little sitting-room connects with my salon only. I will lock that also, so that you may feel safer."

"Why? What should I be afraid of?" asked Nathalie. Catherine smiled.

"I supposed you believed all the fantastic legends of my country the English tell," she said, her face growing graver as she spoke. "I imagined you might dread to

be left alone, even for a few hours, on your first morning in a strange city so far from your own world."

"It is your country. That is enough to make me no stranger," protested the girl. "I shall not expect brigands in the morning or pirates on dry land. If any one knocks in Russia, I suppose it will mean exactly what it does in Europe, and I will open the door."

"If any one knocks on your own door, do not trouble to answer. Let them go on to mine. Nitchka, my maid, speaks Polish as well as Russian. Call her if you wish anything done, or if you want to ask about anything you do not understand. Good-night!—as you say in England," she added, turning for another swift survey of the room. They kissed as if to assure each other sweet dreams.

Left to herself to make a light breakfast, already spread by the French window opening upon the balcony, Nathalie gazed about her with curiosity. She was actually in Russia. Sleep? Should she ever feel sleepy again? She pushed back the blind and stepped out upon the balcony, over which an awning was stretched of exactly the same pattern as in London or New York. Opposite her, with only the rather narrow street and pavement between, was the famous Saxon garden, also laid out by an Englishman. Through the soft foliage of stately trees she could see patches of colour that must be monster flower beds in radiant bloom. A very cry of colour escaping the intense shade! As she gazed, white swans slipped noiselessly into the waters of a miniature lake, and from some hidden distance came the cool plashing of luxuriant fountains. Already the garden was coming to life for the day. Officers were crossing and recrossing and people were beginning to take their coffee

and fruit at the piazza cafés at the end nearest the hotel. Soon the strains of an orchestra were faintly audible. Nurses and children began to appear in little groups and old people to be established along the quieter paths on the park benches, furthest from the ever-changing crowd that made a thoroughfare of the converging paths that must cross somewhere near the fountain, she decided, though she could not see where except in imagination. Over the tops of the trees that impeded her view, to her left, rose the cathedral with its giant gold bulbs hotly resplendent in the spring sunshine.

She was recalled from her first delight in the spectacle by a low knock upon her outer door. It sounded timidly at first, or respectfully, as if a servant waited her pleasure; then, before she could respond, it became imperative. Forgetting Catherine's instructions, she crossed the room and opened the door wide.

Two men in uniform stood outside. One of them, apparently an officer of the Russian police, spoke to her in Russian. She glanced from him to his companion in confusion. Instantly they both strode forward as if, taking advantage of the open door, to press their way in. But she did not move to make their admission possible. The second then, as if impatient of her silence, began also to speak. She fancied it was in Polish from the "skis" that flew from the ends of his words. Understanding nothing, she shook her head good-naturedly, and with a sign of non-comprehension began to close the door. This must have been a mistake in her diplomacy, for instantly every trace of courtesy disappeared from the manner of both men. The first speaker stepped over the threshold, and his subordinate followed him so closely that she was obliged to step back or be walked over in

his insolent progress. She was startled more than she would admit to herself. These could not be robbers in broad daylight, but all the tales she had ever heard of innocent travellers who had been victims of mistaken identity in Russia and the Orient flashed through her mind with disagreeable sharpness. What if they meant to arrest her for complicity in some plot against the Tsar? Who would ever know what had happened to her? Catherine had already gone out and was not losing an hour in her service for her regiment. Her room was at the extreme end of the hotel, the empty salon next afforded no human protection. There was not a soul in the Bruhlowski who knew her or could establish her identity. Her heart beat unpleasantly as she stepped to the bell to summon Nitchka, but to her discomfiture she found it was out of service—a fact which neither Catherine nor herself had observed in their hasty survey of her quarters. The taller of the two men meantime stepped to the table in the centre of the room, and deliberately began looking over the litter dropped there, as if searching for something. Probably they meant to rob her quietly, and trust to her ignorance of Polish to make their escape in safety. She knew that all Americans were considered fabulously rich in these far-away countries. Probably they were searching for diamonds now. She would not yet admit to herself that she was frightened. Turning to them, with her hand still upon the useless bell, she said bravely in German:

“You have made a mistake. Leave me, please, at once. I am only an American traveller arrived this morning.”

The men looked at each other and shook their heads.

"I am the friend of Madame Melyukof," said Nathalie, hoping to influence them by the well-known charm of Catherine's name.

One of them smiled—a smile that seemed to her instantly full of covert malignity. The other did not even look up, but continued his search, impertinently handling over such letters and papers as lay within reach. The second, meantime, produced a document, to her entirely unintelligible save for her own name, which appeared in the middle written in red ink. Thereupon both men began to talk with each other, and, as on the train, by virtue of that inexplicable suspicion we feel when two people are speaking together in a tongue we do not understand, that they are speaking evil of us, Nathalie was convinced that they spoke of their own pleasure in her discomfort. At that moment one of them, with an exclamation of satisfaction in having found what he was after, snatched up her American passport from the floor, where it had fallen, and they simultaneously began to retire, taking it with them as they went. This was too much to bear.

"What are you doing?" cried Nathalie. "Give it to me—it is mine!" But the taller officer only bowed with his hand on the door.

"No!" she cried, snatching it from him with a wrench that must have given his wrist a memorable twist. Her eyes blazed, and the second officer caught her arm as if he believed her capable of assault.

"No!" she said firmly, this time in French. "You do not succeed in any plot to imprison me in your unprincipled country against my will! You will not get my passport from me, alive!"

The taller officer stood as if confounded. The hand

of the other tingled from its contact with the sharp edge of the table, where the girl had flung it in her instinctive effort to be free of its hateful restraint upon her arm. It was but an instant of astonishment before they both were about to treat her as she so richly deserved when Nitchka, Catherine's Russian maid, entered from the salon, unbidden.

"Nitchka, stop them! They are trying to rob me of my passport! Call madame!" she begged hysterically.

Little Nitchka made a despairing gesture of comprehension, naive as it was complete. "It is but the universelle police regulation, mademoiselle. One must comply," she explained rapidly in her pretty French. "They are obliged to take it within three hours of arrival, to assure the government of the respectability of mademoiselle and also to insure her protection in case of offence. It is necessary. Mademoiselle must be accounted for immediately, to prevent grave difficulty."

She turned to the officers, speaking in her native tongue and theirs, and again the only word recognisable to Nathalie was "*Americanski*." The frown on the face of the younger officer relaxed as he listened. The older one, whose dignity still suffered with his lame wrist, withdrew without so much as a salute or glance in her direction.

The experience, absurd as it proved, left Nathalie with an odd sense of her helplessness. In a country where she could neither speak nor understand she was left without her passport, unable to pass that critical frontier at Alexandrowo which had seemed so uneventful a bit of geography to her on her eastward way only a few hours earlier in the morning! A three days' notification would be necessary, at best, to procure a desired

permission to depart. Suppose it should be denied her under one pretext or another? The freedom of her own native land gave her much to think of. As an American she exulted in the liberty to cross wastes of wave and wind unhindered and go from sea to sea, through many States, without hindrance or question. It was the first time in her life that a government had laid its heavy hand on her, the first check her fearless independence had submitted. Queer problems of monarchy and republic sprang to importance, which she had always ignored as only of interest to Congress, or the Houses of Parliament, or similar stuffy middle-aged men, presumably good for nothing less tedious.

The sound of marching feet drew her to the window at last. What she saw she never forgot in all the varied days that followed. Two chained convicts were walking barefooted, attended by a dozen soldiers and two women with babies in their arms, and children dragging at their skirts, faces set toward Siberia. The sullen despair of the convicts as they walked, the indifference of the guard, the misery of the women—it was all past in a minute. What a tableau against a morning heart!

Nitchka, hearing her exclamation of pity, came to the other window and glanced out in her turn.

"What is it, Nitchka? Where are they going? What does it mean?"

The peasant servant answered indifferently, without a sign of sympathy, it seemed to Nathalie:

"They have been deported, by the grace of God, mademoiselle."

"And what have they done?"

The maid seemed bored as any aristocrat as she replied:

"Stolen bread, perhaps, or drank vodka and lay stupid where they tripped an officer. It is nothing. Do not look at them if it makes you unhappy."

Yes, this was beginning to be Russia! It had seemed to her like any foreign capital at first. Now the mask was down. She recognised it. She felt as if the hand of the autocracy was stealthily groping for her own throat. It made her shiver in the bright sunshine, with the murmur of those hidden fountains in her ears. As she stood staring after the gruesome little company, voices of young girls chanting sacred canticles rose up to her from the same direction as that in which the chain gang had just disappeared. And around the same corner came a procession of maidens in white, singing in honour of the Virgin. Their priests preceded them, clad in brilliant vestments, and above their heads were held banners of every sacred device. The blue and silver, gold and ruby of their flashing hues mingled with the impression of the unfamiliar strains of their song, raised in the clear treble of girlish adoration.

The contrast was distracting. What manner of country was this? Nathalie gasped with the incongruities of her first short hour. At this rate the thrills would exhaust themselves by dinner time on the very first day! She decided to save the rest, and unpack her stupidly familiar trunks, to give her excited nerves a respite from this mixture of beauty and horror. For a short time she adhered to her intention. She tossed chiffons about till the place looked like a poppy garden in bloom; made heartrending discovery of important trifles left behind in the haste of her packing, and swore on a feather fan—the oath of Watteau, Hilary had called it—that she was a fool to have brought such nonsense at all, when

the family photographs dripped consecutively from the chair where she had tossed them and lay with faces up, reproachfully staring at her. Their English handsomeness was unperturbed by their savage surroundings. Uncle James' placid, self-satisfied face; Aunt Janet's faded prettiness, a remnant of girlish grace still lurking near the eyes; and Hilary's rather high brow where the hair was too faultlessly parted above the heavily arched eyebrows, that would be supercilious however little of a snob the man might be behind them, made their individual appeal. She stooped over and picked up the portrait of her cousin only. One had to admit its distinction. The mouth that protested its cynicism to be beyond its own control or inclination could speak the simplest, tenderest truth to women. Those grey eyes could speak that same truth as if they knew it true—which she felt was impossible, knowing Hilary. England! How far away it seemed! She was not homesick, for home in its true sense she had none, but a wistful thought of distance and strangeness crept over her in spite of herself. She drew the writing-table nearer to the window. She might as well write home at once. It would be days before they received it. The invitation from Lord Gore for his Sunday-nights-in-June must be regretted with more than the convention of a card. He had asked her to spare him an impression or two of her travels, and she had been rather proud of the request. Hilary had said he should miss her more than any one else, and Lord Gore had contradicted him, not openly as if in sport, but quite without smiling, when he had taken tea at Sir James' the very afternoon she was leaving. Hilary had been so kind. She had never before taken into account how good it was for a brotherless, fatherless girl

to have a cousin as kind as Hilary had always been. She had never cared before. Distance and lack of sleep were making a dangerously fond perspective. The grave, attractive face of Lord Gore seemed to rebuke her madcap race across civilisation to this kingdom of frontiers, where she was permitted to enter by passport and to leave by grace of official permit.

She would write to Hilary first. After she got really in the spirit of it she would perhaps send Lord Gore a sketch of her first Russian attraction and repulsion. She did not mean him altogether to forget her. She drew the ink within reach and dipping in her pen addressed the first envelope. She would not send Hilary's letter to the club. It should go directly home. After she had written his name and added the London address she sat motionless, as if seeing it all before her again. In fancy she followed the letter she would write home across Germany and through France, over the channel and up the very pavement in the postman's hand—to the breakfast table even, where Sir James would be taking his early coffee with Watson beside him, as if Wallingford behind his chair was incapable of attending sufficiently to his lordship's discreet appetite.

To fix the location of the hotel in her mind she rose and stepped again out upon the balcony. Aunt Janet always wanted to know the exact location of hotels, and what point of compass they faced, and what the thermometer was in the morning. The letter would count for nothing with this information omitted. Before she had definitely decided where the sun rose, down the opposite side of the street close to the iron paling that fenced the Saxon gardens swept a figure unlike any she had ever seen. Stalking the street with the tread of an

Arab, his brown coat skirts flying, his red vest flaring to view, a spirited creature of grace and savage pride combined, she knew at a glance it must be a Cossack officer. A general, probably, at least! His silver dagger at his belt caught the sunbeams. His silver spurs flashed. On his lifted breast his cartridges rode triumphantly. Opposite the hotel he turned sharply and stood motionless at "attention," while some one, concealed from her, spoke to him from the doorway beneath her balcony. Some one was speaking peremptorily, giving an order sharply in Russian. Who could be more exalted than this magnificent creature? Curious to discover who could out-rank him, Nathalie leaned forward and looked down.

At the door of the Bruhlowski, beneath her, sat a mounted officer, a cavalryman, she supposed. At first blush she saw that even England never taught a seat in the saddle like this. Only a Centaur might hope to rival this horseman below. Still regarding him as mere scenery, she continued to gaze down at him until, perhaps through animal magnetism or perhaps by chance, the eyes of the rider were slowly lifted to her own.

It was a deliberate glance exchanged between them. He blanched as if a bullet had struck him, and she withdrew, drawing the blinds behind her, to throw herself face down upon the couch, with closed eyes held firmly together by a determined hand as if to threaten sleep lest it desert her forever.

Yet between the quivering eyelids burned the kindling glance of the Centaur—impassioned, fiery, melting. Flame and ice in turn enthralling her as by the mythical power of some outlived legend of enchantment. She shrank as if her soul had been bared to a stranger. She put it from her. She gloated over it and relived it, and

shivered and recalled it as the slow hours smiled away the summer morning, and the children's voices grew lusty in the gardens, and the repose of the Bruhlowski was broken by the sound of many feet as the officers thronged the popular café for their luncheon. The odour of their cigarettes came up to her, with gay laughter and often the clinking of glasses and popping of corks. She wondered if He was there. Who *was* He?

Reason told her, one of many thousand uniformed officers, whom it was entirely unlikely she should ever see again. Desire whispered, nay clamoured, to the contrary. Her heart cried, "He is Russian! And I fear him!"

Nitchka, coming to unpack for Miss Mainwaring, laid the addressed envelope beneath an orderly pile of stationery upon the writing-table, where it was destined to lie for many days, as far from the remembrance of Nathalie as merrie England itself lay from the Polish garrison town on the shores of the superbly flowing Vistula!

CHAPTER III

SERGE

CATHERINE did not permit Nathalie to be awakened until evening. She was much occupied herself, going and coming without rest, as if it were not the first day after her arrival. There was much to be done and many persons to be seen. She received the head nurse of the Red Cross band that was going out under her supervision, within an hour of her arrival, and had already put lagging details en train for the far East, where her own thoughts continuously sped. The young Colonel Krasemskin had come to her in the early morning to tell her of his love affair with this same nurse and implore her aid with his too reluctant family. The delinquent brother had lunched with her briefly, to accommodate her own engagements with the war office. The General of her husband's regiment had dashed up to pay his respects to her, his blooded bay, a magnificent animal, driven by a coachman in the costume of the old Russian style, a loose, wadded garment gathered in at the waist, enhancing his bulk. As he drove with arms outstretched and reins loose upon the stallion's neck, the light carriage seemed as if swept on wings instead of drawn by ordinary brute force. The General had a second motive in paying his early visit. The last of the regimental balls was set for the evening following and he had promised the military club the honour of her presence. On her refusal he declared that Catherina Ivanovna could never

remain so hard-hearted as to refuse the regiment a sight of her face after her long desertion. He would cut off her decorations with his own sword if she but suggested it. He would report her to the Tsar himself! There were no lengths he was not dramatically prepared to go if she persisted in her refusal. At her gentle expression of surprise that he should encourage dancing now he overwhelmed her with his sympathetic "Let the poor fellows dance while they can. God knows they will dance to different music soon enough!"

She repeated the round of her day's visits and occupations to Nathalie as they dined together in their own salon, not caring to join the world in the gay dining hall below, from which echoes and cigar smoke impartially rose to them from time to time through the open windows, carrying a genial sense of conviviality and companionship. With the true philosophy of soldiers, they who dined to-night would also sleep, drink and laugh, for to-morrow the grim burden of war might be laid across their shoulders in deadly earnest.

Nathalie's colour deepened at mention of the ball.

"I am a selfish silly to want to go, when you are working so hard all day," she said accusingly. "Don't think of it. I can't have you working day and night too."

"But it would be a pleasure for you. Something new at least. Something you would enjoy and remember," persisted Catherine, smiling over her struggle.

"I am really crazy to see it, as a sort of pageant," Nathalie confessed. "I have heard about the mazourka all my life and never seen it danced. But you must not spoil me, Catherine-the-Greater! I came out here to help you, and I want to do it. I have begun by sleeping all day, while you worked."

"To-morrow—" began Catherine.

"Ah, to-morrow we will begin seriously, and you must not treat me as a guest, or I shall feel I am just a trouble instead of your soldier."

"But you are so young, and I am almost an old woman," began Catherine in justification of her indulgence.

"Old! You are the youngest and most wonderful being in the world. Everybody adores you. I realise it freshly out here. You will marry again, Catherine."

The face of the Russian became suddenly solemn, like the silent chapel of some unfrequented church. "Don't you believe in the holy evangel?" she asked unexpectedly; "my life is only a waiting to be united fully with the spirit of my Dimitri."

"You saint! I wish I were like you," cried the girl impulsively, impressed by the purity of this vision of an ideal love that opened before her.

"Do not say it, even in jest," protested Catherine, clasping her hands as if in supplication. "I am so often unresigned, so rebellious against God, even now."

"But to live in such an exalted love—devoted, true, unpretending; to make it a living thing, a life ascending always."

"Ah, bozhe moi!" sighed the older woman; "if you wish to love as I love, you must have a Russian lover. There is only one way to learn to love truly—as God loves His stars, as night loves and heals."

"You are a poet, too," interrupted Nathalie.

"No, no, little one," she said humbly and simply, "only a Russian heart that loves. We are all alike in this." Then to divert the conversation from herself, perhaps, she added, "Also Krasemskin was here to-day—a very handsome officer, who was much interested in

hearing of the American beauty, of whom he had heard rumours from the mess in some gossiping fashion."

So it was Colonel Krasemskin she had seen mounted at her very door. Nathalie became inattentive at once through inward emotion. She wanted to ask about this stranger, yet she could not speak of him. Something stronger than her will held her silent. So it was Krasemskin she had seen! She should see him again. She had heard his name often.

"I wish we had come sooner," continued Catherine, disregarding the abstraction of her listener, "the poor boy is in great trouble. He is in love—has even been so ill-advised as to make no secret of it. In fact, his betrothal is known, to my head nurse. He wants her to marry him before the campaign."

"In love?" echoed Nathalie vaguely.

"In love, if you call being on fire for a woman, love," assented Catherine rather doubtfully. "There is no sacrifice he is not prepared to make and to demand of us, his friends, as well."

Something inside Nathalie's breast turned suddenly faint as she tried to ask indifferently, "Is he a Cossack officer?"

But before the answer came she had a deadly presentiment that it was her Centaur, and she had come too late. Did he know it too? Had his glance possessed, only to renounce? Suddenly the girl felt at the mercy of great elements beyond her control. Powers and passions existed, were realities that might torment and destroy one. Why had she stepped out of her dreams into this unguarded life that forced her on into the unknown? That it was life, her pounding pulses assured her. She hardly heard the rest of Catherine's experiences, until the low

voice repeated her brother's name. "Also, my brother was here to-day—my baby brother Serge. He came in very hot and weary from his early drill, to embrace me before he was off again on a round of engagements, but I kept him for a hurried luncheon when he found me alone."

"Why do you call him your baby brother? He is an officer, is he not?" Nathalie was not especially interested, except that she wished not to appear indifferent.

"Yes, an officer in a Cossack regiment, but to me he seems always like a little son," said Catherine fondly. "I will explain our family a little to you, dear. It will be the simplest way to help you understand us. My mother was the only daughter of a landowner of high birth and title. She ran away with a Cossack. He was already a General. He was also, unfortunately, married when he first saw her. But it made no difference with either, for from their first glance in each other's eyes they knew it was to be. And before he could have made any arrangement to soften the catastrophe to his wife, God saw the justice of it and took pity on them, causing her to die of a sudden fever. My mother went with him to Moscow, where they were in a heaven of happiness."

Nathalie caught her breath and laid her hand softly on Catherine's.

"Do you believe in love at the first glance?" she asked, in spite of herself.

"It is always that with us," was the reply. "We love instantly, once and forever. It is our way."

"And these lovers, your mother and her Cossack lover, they were always happy?"

"Always. The only shadow on their joy came through her twin brother, my Uncle Vladimir, who went early to

a brotherhood near Tiflis, in the Caucas. He is a black friar now; a monk of the order of Saint Basil, devoted to prayer and contemplation, in total seclusion and constant preparation for death."

"Did love drive him to it?" asked Nathalie. What proportions love was assuming out here! It seemed to be the governing force behind every action.

"Love was not responsible alone," said Catherine. "He was a recluse by nature, solitary from the family habit of lonely living on vast estates hundreds of versts from the nearest city. He was a hermit by birth, just as my mother was, on the contrary, gay, passionate and loving-of-the-world. His going almost broke her heart. She lost him in agony and never spoke of him until she lay dying. 'Vladimir, Serge,' she whispered. Her last sigh, her last weak word, her last straying thought was for him. As I hung over her, with the priests, she whispered over and over, 'Vladimir, bless me, bless little Serge, protect—'" Catherine's face was white with the pain of her memories.

"And you were the mother then?" said Nathalie gently.

"Yes. The little brothers and sisters were all in my charge, for my father soon followed her, till one by one they have married and only Serge is left to me. He was the youngest and I the oldest. I am nearly forty and my youngest sister, Wanda, in London, is a married woman, as you know, with a child of her own. But Serge seems my baby brother still."

"Is he like you?" Nathalie looked up admiringly into the dark face she loved so devotedly as she spoke. Catherine shook her head. "The great Napoleon declared all Russian character, to a certain extent, feminine, but remember always, dear one, that he is a man, a Kazak."

"Is he fond of women, or does he hate them?"

"I cannot answer that for him. I think he dreads them," she said slowly. "But I will tell you the device he has painted over his stable door; it is this, 'The more I see of women the more I love horses!'" She gave it first in English, then in Russian.

"How very unnerving the Russian language is!" cried Nathalie. "It would kill me to be made love to in Russian. I should die of it, I should adore it so!"

"Serge has had a good deal of love made to him, I believe, in various tongues," admitted Catherine. "They speak of his conquests, but he, never. I think he trifles, as all officers do, with the best known artistes and singers, but with the women of society he is irreproachable—even indifferent in manner."

"Tell me more about him. Is he fond of horses to the exclusion of woman?"

"He is devoted to his race horses. He will perhaps show you the trophies he has won with them. He rode in all the officers' races until he was taken off the course, last year, as dead. He would race again if he could afford the luxury, but he is not rich enough now."

"I did not suppose an officer's pay would ever support a racing stable. It would not in England."

"Serge has used up two fortunes already," said his sister gaily. "He is too generous. Fatally generous, and fatally popular! He is also a hero worshipper. If one is great he will commit any folly for them. He has only recently ruined himself for a friend. Once when the plague broke out on the field he nursed soldiers and nurses alike, and on his return to Petersburg the whole theatre rose to salute him when he entered as modestly as if the acclaim were for some other person. He will

never repulse a beggar if he has a kopek or can borrow one. His soldiers worship him."

"I suppose he is disgusted that I am here to spoil his last few days with you," began Nathalie.

Catherine laughed.

"He pretends to be afraid of you," she agreed. "His soldier told him tales of you."

"It was because I was here that he did not come to meet you?"

"Only partly; his time is not at his own disposition," Catherine evaded, as if wishing to soften his disinclination. "We Russians have not a very definite idea of time. Except in military affairs, Serge was from birth indolent. Punctuality is not a Russian virtue, I am afraid. And even if he is a little, a very little impatient at first, and not quite appreciative of your being with me, dear, you will not feel unkindly toward him—for my sake?"

"For your sake I promise to be charming to him, however horrid he may be to me. Besides, I may meet another Cossack who will like me better than horses."

Again, for some indefinable reason, she did not like to invite Catherine to speculation as to the identity of the Centaur. But the memory of the morning troubled her more than once during their drive out to the military club through the deep dusk on the evening of the ball.

They had started late and driven slowly, so their arrival was only in time for supper, at which the General seated them one on each side, having presented them both with mammoth bouquets of red and yellow roses. The younger officer on her left spoke French with perfect ease and left her no excuse for staring about the table or at the faces of the guests, as she would have been glad to do. There seemed to be always a health to

be drunk or a pretty toast to receive. She was conscious of being an object of sincere admiration as well as curiosity. She found the great room not unlike any military club save for the prominence of the imperial portraits looking down upon her, but she did not find the face for which she had come. The Centaur was not there.

To confirm her disappointment she asked Catherine as they left the table if her friend Colonel Krasemskin was among the dancers. But Catherine thought he would hardly care to come under existing circumstances, and her negative confirmed the blank in the girl's hidden consciousness. She had counted, in spite of herself, on meeting those eyes again, those eyes that belonged to another woman too. It was not until the mazourka was forming that Nathalie felt the sting of being left out. She had been presented to numberless young officers, who looked at her longingly and were grieved to find her ignorant of their favourite dance. One by one they left her to secure their desired partners, until she was practically alone. Catherine, of course, held court uninterruptedly. Wistfully the girl watched the dancers as they took their places for this crowning event of the ball; partners being chosen with evident empressment, as if the mark of preference thus conferred was a signal honour. The band broke out with a nervous crash that sent a thrill through her blood and a pang of regret to her heart. To be wasting this glorious music by sitting against a wall! It made her feel curiously old and set aside, out of her element and helpless against the wounds inflicted by that relentless music. She, Nathalie Mainwaring, who never sat out a number, was sitting here between the wife of the General and a luckless officer detailed by courtesy to her service, while his roving eyes

proved how superficial was the pleasure he was professing in remaining by her side. Taking pity on him, she dismissed him and virtually insisted on his sharing the beloved amusement; then she was free to amuse herself in her own way.

At first she was delighted and confused only by the intricacy of the dance, the unfamiliarity of the faces and forms, the flashing uniforms and marvellous dexterity of spurs amid filmy pitfalls of lace and silk. The music grew maddening. Every nerve in her body tingled to its challenge. And here she was, sitting like an old woman while others danced! After a little her gaze became riveted upon one figure, a Cossack officer. He wore the high boots of the cavalry, the long blue coat sheathing a figure of fervour and of steel. He danced away from her, his head thrown back, one hand resting lightly on his sword hilt, his movement one of incomparable grace and bravura. When he advanced to her side of the ball-room, though he did not lift his eyes, she was startled by a conviction that he was the same apparition of the morning before—the Centaur who had gazed from his horse straight up into her heart. She could not ask his name. That same diffidence in singling him out to others prevented her that had restrained her from describing him to Catherine earlier in the evening. She let her eyes follow him. She was sure it was he. He danced as a dervish prays. Each step was executed with the precision of a military manœuvre. His handsome face seemed utterly preoccupied, even entranced. He scarcely glanced toward his partner, whose finger tips he held in his own as deftly and daintily as a woman might hold a parouquet in some court boudoir. The girl he was dancing with was not in the least a beauty—Nathalie noticed that

at once—but she danced faultlessly, even to the critical eyes now bent upon her, eager to find a flaw. On and on they danced; he, always with his hand upon his sword, swaying as dreamily as his own Russian wheat fields in the summer wind, managing his long spurs with utter nonchalance; only a flash in the eyes and a swift-ness in following the least flicker in the rhythm, to denote the suppressed excitement and intense pleasure he found in his own performance of the measure. Assured he had not recognised her presence, Nathalie's gaze never left him again. His manner had in it something of the composure of the Oriental and the reserve of the diplomat. As the pace became more reckless toward the close, and the band seemed bent on luring them all headlong to destruction, the panting dancers quickened their step and became more or less dishevelled and audacious. Only the imperturbable serenity of these two remained unchanged. Swift and swifter they flew, with the look of wings, in an ecstasy of mated motion.

Nathalie could no longer refrain from speaking of them to the General. She had recognised her Cossack and he was likely to disappear after the dance abruptly as he had come. He had not appeared at supper, probably he would vanish again, and she could not refuse herself the satisfaction of a glance of interrogation from the nearing pair to the Russian at her side. He divined her question before she had need to speak it.

"You admire their dancing, mademoiselle, as do we all. He dances from habit with Olga. She is not a beauty, my daughter, no, but she is slim as a 'sabin,' and he cannot endure the fat woman. That is a legend of his regiment."

"They dance wonderfully together." She complimented

the girl to win from the father that which she wanted to hear.

"It will be their last dance, perhaps forever," he said sadly. "He came only for the mazourka, for that reason, to-night. He will be ordered away at any moment."

"I did not know it was your daughter," said Nathalie innocently. "The officer is Colonel Krasemskin, is he not?"

"Krasemskin? Nyet," he replied with some haughtiness. "There is but one who dances as Serge Ivanevitch."

Serge Ivanevitch! Catherine's little brother surely. The astonishment of it all took her breath away. She should meet him then—often. As the dance finished she watched him still, but more furtively. Had he seen her? His own face remained serious, but those standing about him, to whom he was speaking, seemed extraordinarily amused by his wit. From time to time he looked away from them all, as if removed in spirit and indifferent to the homage or susceptibility of his admirers, male and female alike. It seemed to Nathalie as if his eyes were alight with inward dreams. They were liquid and large, undimmed by the scenes of military earth; eyes in which lay the certain sorrows of unknown men. Poet's eyes, doomed to the knowledge of all love, all pain and parting suffered by all mankind since the world began. The mouth was a little too fine and sweet to be strong; the lips, with a hint of discontent upon them in spite of their clear crimson, a suggestion of distaste, of the scornful expression of a mortal apart from his fellows, who appeared to scorn because in reality he did not observe, not because he observed and intentionally scorned. It was a face, taken altogether, that seemed to estimate human

joy in its imperfection, a face of disappointment in life as it was.

Answering the sallies of the General at random, Nathalie continued her study of the man, who was not far from her, on her left, in the midst of a group of officers now, entertained by some amusing bit of acting on his part. The brow, she concluded, would be almost too high and full if the hair was not so soft and massive at the temples. The eyebrows were level and sharply marked; the chin delicate, though round and curved, as if all the pains of the sculptor had been spent on this one feature. The cheeks were rather too full for classic ideals of beauty, not sensuous or animal, but escaping, visibly, by a small margin. His colour denoted brilliant health, and in figure he was gracefully rather than heavily made.

Noticing her interest at last, the General said, with a smile of proprietorship, "Well, what do you think of him, the brother of our friend?"

"His face?" she asked. "I don't know. It is only the setting for his eyes to me, as yet. I have not got beyond them. They are very wonderful."

He raised a warning finger playfully.

"The eyes of Serge Ivanevitch are a frontier. Fateful, it may be. There have been Russian, Polish, and even the sophisticated French women who have got as far as that before you, mademoiselle, and been halted there." He laughed at her evident bewilderment and the impression made upon her by his favourite officer.

"He looks too young to be very dangerous," flouted Nathalie, half vexed.

The General's smile sobered.

"He is a demon in the saddle," he said under his breath; "full of flash and fire in his regiment. The

device of the Cossack is, as you know, to die or conquer. He has had a romantic career; always trying sensational experiments, a brilliant fellow, a dare-devil soldier. Reckless dog! He ran away from us once when he was a schoolboy, and we nearly lost him in a monastery. He is a military genius. We will never let him go from us, never! And yet we must never forget that our enemies say, 'In Russia genius is a passport to Siberia.' We must keep him from his insane dreams. He is, alas, visionary."

What more he might have said was cut short, for Catherine was approaching, with her brother following reluctantly, with downcast eyes. On being presented to Nathalie he hardly raised them above the hand he stooped to kiss, as Russian formality required. His lips were hot through her glove, but his manner that of a child haughty through shyness. He waited, perfectly at his ease, but not raising his eyes. It was for her to begin the conversation. She offered him a few sentences of French, when to her delight he replied, still without looking at her:

"I speak also English. I took it from my sisters. It is not difficult—for a Russian."

"Then I can tell you so much better how wasted and misspent my life seems to me that I have never learned to dance your mazourka," she exclaimed.

"Yes? And our dance is a novelty to you, then? Probably you find it too 'barbare'?"

"Oh, but I was crazy to dance it myself," she contradicted.

"But, why, then, did you not dance? I should have danced it with you."

Never once did he look toward her face or lift his eyes.

"I only know how to waltz and *deux temps*. It is very difficult to learn, your mazourka?" she said, forgetting how she was revealing her eagerness to accept his invitation.

"But you will try, yes? With me?"

"I suppose nobody cares for the European dances here—the waltz, for example?" she said regretfully.

He noted the quick response to his own desire, though he still avoided meeting her eyes with his own.

"I waltz, mademoiselle," he said, "but the step is not en règle in Russia in high society. I now regret it for the first time—passionately. I should wish to waltz—with you."

For the first time then he raised his eyes and looked straight into her own. And again she felt that strange weakening of her heart and will, as if her pulses had missed a beat. Something made her feel as the high-strung violin when the bow sweeps across the strings.

Another officer spoke to him, and she made a pretext of her interest in their Russian speech together to cover her blurred confusion.

"What were you saying?" she asked gaily. "Tell me, so that I shall know a few words to speak if some one asks me to dance."

"Do you swear to say exactly as I shall tell you?"

"If you will first tell me what he said to you and what made you frown, and what there was in your reply that made him look at me and go away; yes."

"Then I will tell you," said Serge gently, in his sweet voice; "I was sending him to all devils."

"But why? I don't understand you. What was he saying to anger you?"

"He was asking to be presented to you," he said simply. "He is a Colonel Krasemskin; not a brilliant officer. You would not be charmed with him. If I ask them to play a waltz now will you dance with me?" he urged suddenly. "Ah, do not refuse me! I am sure you will not be so cruel, so a woman of the iron heart."

He had not the least idea that she would accept; it was the Russian way, the gracious Russian habit of urgency when surest of refusal; offering all, confident in the exchange of compliment that neither would be inconvenienced in the end for the flattering invitation pressed, and the regretful refusal, whose only imaginable reality lay in the performance of an established etiquette. Of this Nathalie was unaware. It was his branding the waltz as unconventional that taught her to ignore his pleading and refuse, as he expected her to do.

"No; I should only disappoint you," she objected with a sigh, "especially after that exquisite partner who danced your step so divinely."

"She is too fat," objected Serge; "also, we have in Russia this proverb, 'Until the sun shines the rose can dazzle you.'"

"She was the most graceful sight possible," protested Nathalie.

Again he astonished her, saying quietly:

"The Frenchman, Joubert, says dancing, like all the arts, should make the soul imaginable by means of the body; I feel that your soul so revealed would be a miracle of beauty."

"And the soul of a Cossack—is that revealed by his dancing?" she parried, a little white under the intensity of his manner.

"Ah, nyet!" he objected curtly, and then, as Catherine

neared to take Nathalie away, he said rapidly: "The soul of a Cossack is a secret to all, mademoiselle, save to the woman who loves him," he added, hardly above a whisper, again bending over her hand in adieu.

CHAPTER IV

A NOCTURNE OF RUBINSTEIN

HE CAME to them the next evening for dinner, without invitation, assuming his welcome and overcoming whatever reluctance he had formerly displayed in sharing his sister with the American stranger by bringing Krasemskin also. They were very late; indeed, he had been to Otwock and was but just returned. Krasemskin spoke no English and chatted with Catherine, as undoubtedly Serge had intended he should. Serge himself talked not at all. He ate and drank enthusiastically and appeared to have withdrawn to the remote recesses of his own individuality. Only the candles had been lighted in the salon, for the evening was warm, and after Krasemskin had excused himself, Nathalie, seating herself at the open piano, played to herself and to them if they chose to listen, dreamily at first, French songs, bits of opera, modulated chords, then at the request of Serge, Tschai-kowsky, Chopin and Rubinstein.

The brother and sister sat on the balcony outside the long windows, overlooking the dusky Saxon garden, watching the shadows of the trees just moving in the sultry night wind. There, too, adored by Serge, the swans, actors of a most exquisite summer drama, were lovers always. Over his heart they exerted a perpetual fascination. To him they were such stuff as dreams were made of, whether all day long their white plumes drooped

above the emerald turf or drifted on the tiny lake where at noonday they were always gliding to escape the sun; or at dusk when they flitted between the dense shadow of the foliage, swimming noiselessly together; or by moonlight, wakeful, to startle the beholder with a tremor of delight in the vision. To-night his sensitive joy in these phantom beings was curiously blent with the soft entreaty of the music floating out to him. Nathalie played on, feeling the sympathy of their silence. It might have been an hour since any word had been spoken. At last she played the Rubinstein E flat etude, that mysterious Night, ending with the despairing cry for love. Russia was red in her veins and she played it not unworthily, working up the close longing of the theme to the great chords that break from the heart too sore oppressed. It brought Serge instantly to her side. He lifted her hands, now lying passive upon the ivory keys, and touched them with his lips as he would have inclined before a holy relic at some immortal shrine. His love of music was as profound as his knowledge of it was catholic.

"Listen, I will say to you the words in Russian," he offered, gravely. "Then, after, I will recite them to you in English, and you will understand how you have expressed them in music."

His rich voice thrilled her with its subdued cadence as he pronounced the unfamiliar words that fell upon her ears as if with a new gift of sense. All the musks of the Orient, the glamour of the Tsar's tragic empire, the heart of lovers and poetry of a new-born race were brought together in these husky or vibrant syllables unlike any language she had heard for power and thrall.

"It is a call to the Beloved," he told her. "It is saying, if I can make it for you in English, like this:

"My voice that is languid caressing thee by day,
Disturbs the silence of the Midnight's gloom;
Beside my bed the wistful taper burns
And my rhymes harmonious wed, flow
Even as the rills of love flow, full of thee!
Thine eyes upon me are shining through the dark,
They smile upon me, I hear the blissful words:
My own, I love thee!—am forever thine!"

She felt the echo of their romantic spell in the English, but interrupted him, saying, "I would rather guess their meaning from the Russian. I had never known how cold our English modulations were before."

"But not as your poets use it," he dissented; "your Byron, what could even Russian add to him?"

"It is generous of you to say so. I should not think any language would seem worth speaking to you, knowing Russian."

"And yet I speak nine. But none so eloquently as you have spoken to-night."

"Music is a woman's language; it is not often to be spoken, except with those who comprehend, never," she said softly.

"Ah, yes, and with all tongues it is something the same. The Russian speaks French in diplomacy, German for exact definition, Italian for art, English because he must, since civilisation demands it; Greek for the past of his faith, but Russian for his prayers to the Eternal and to the woman he loves."

"You have loved?" she asked. Did she hope he would deny it?

"Many, many times," he assured her. Her face perhaps betrayed disappointment in his answer, for he slowly qualified by adding, "that is, the love of the

sense, or the heart, but the love of the soul, never! It is how to escape it that I am always fighting. It will be for me a calamity. I am a fatalist, and I have my presentiment of evil before it arrives. Love that touches the soul will be for me the end. If I suspect myself, I shall fly—let it be to exile or to war. A prisoner I will not be made!”

Only later in the night it occurred to her that in safety no man trembles. Why should he defy love if already he had not a cause for fear? When the Bruhlowski slept, from time to time in the gardens opposite, a white vision would raise its wraith-like form among the rushes, then nestle away into the soft blackness of the sedge. It is a tryst of love. Let the stars shine on! One more Leda has lured her feathered fate. In their sleep the fountains are murmuring of water lilies that lie upon their breasts—but beyond such apparitions, only the spirit of dreams is awake, mocking the boast of human frailty! After his first subjection to the unregulated fancies of the ivory gate, Serge forsook his bed, and worked till dawn over some intricate plans of coast defence long pondered. To Nathalie, sleep was a flitting phantom, dancing far before her in a strange glow lit with the light in the eyes of Serge. When she slept, she trembled to the low vibration of his voice. She woke, as at the cry of the Rubinstein night song, shamed by the intrusion of this Cossack upon the intimacy of her dreaming. His possession of her inmost thought seemed to her without dignity. And yet even in those dreams that still haunted her on waking, and clung about her, it was the spirit of the man that laid his spell upon her; no vulgar material dream of actual approach or even a reflection of his light caress upon her hand.

He seemed to be there with her yet, when Catherine broke in upon her morning reverie half resentful, half mystified. The sun was streaming through the wide windows gilding the great balls on the cathedral, but the face of Serge was before her, shutting out the glory of the morning, or rather relieved against its golden charm. Already life was but a background for him. That soft, dense hair about his brow—she wondered if Catherine had ever kissed it, if any one else had, if in all the world there was a woman equal to filling the soul of that proud child-being, so responsive to the spirit call in art and love?

"What are you thinking of, child?" Catherine asked, when, on pushing open the door, Nathalie had not moved or looked up in reply to her morning greetings. "Thinking of? I?" she repeated vaguely, starting as if detected in something she would rather hide.

"You do not want to leave us? You are not regretting England and that cousin?"

"O Catherine!" was all she could find to say, as she sprang up to kiss her.

"You looked very far away," reproached Catherine, with another caress. "I was afraid you were feeling a tenderness for some unknown lover."

"I must have been thinking of you," she began, not untruthfully, "thinking what I have so many times thought before out here—that you will marry again. You are so young and so universally beloved!" Then, seeing the displeasure on the dear face, she continued hastily, "I was really thinking that Russia is like the sea. One leaves Europe as some familiar coast line, and before, limitlessly stretches the unknown. On the surface one sees the aristocracy as stately ships, and

below the surface every sort of monster and weird beauty are fighting for survival."

Their time in Warsaw was so brief, mobilisation so imminent, that for several succeeding days Catherine was too busy to be interrupted, and Nathalie, when not engaged in writing for her, was much alone upon the balcony; growing to feel quite wonted among these alien surroundings and even able to recognise a few of the strangers who passed as occupants of the same hotel. Serge had deserted them again. He would promise to come and fail, make engagements with them, and plead superior duties after they had waited for him past all patience. As soon as her work permitted, Catherine, in a mood of self-reproach for her neglect, proposed a drive out to Willanow, eager for her guest's enjoyment in the famous château and its noble gardens, now so deserted. For three successive afternoons Serge was not free. His soldier duly arrived with a scrawl to that effect as regularly as the horses came to the door. At last, reinforced by the General as fourth, they did drive out toward twilight through meadows ripe with grain and blue with cornflowers. Lofty trees reared their heads above the floods of grass, in which they stood waist high, giving the aspect of an English park to the scenery, except for the church-villages, a group of huts about the the one sacred edifice. The thatched roofs looked like toy villages in the sweet light of summer afternoon, but might be miserable enough in the long dark winter. The château itself was once the property of the Sobieskis. Constructed in the Italian style, originally as an Italian villa, it had been added to from time to time by successive owners, terraced high, and the lake in the park formed by an arm of the Vistula. It took

a little persuasion to induce the caretaker to allow them inside after hours, and they made their inspection of the stately rooms rather hurriedly. The portraits, the cabinets full of rare curios, the Chinese rooms with their odd completeness of detail furnished at the caprice of some dead owner, were no novelty to the others, but Nathalie lagged behind and found herself pausing alone with Serge before a portrait of John Sobieski on horseback.

"I think him splendid!" she said, with a little nod to him, as if saluting a friend.

"He was very unhappy—even wretched," confessed Serge.

"Ah, but why? In such a retreat as this—and with such a woman!" she turned to the portrait of his wife to confirm her.

"Why? Because with him it was, as usually," said Serge, unconscious of his blunder in English, "his wife was always tormenting him."

Nathalie turned her back to the painted smiles of Marie La Grange rather soberly.

"She does not look like that sort of a woman," she said reluctantly.

"She did not understand his soul," he explained. "She could not. She was not Russian."

Nathalie resented his conclusion. She did not stop to question why. She would have denied that it mattered to her, but it was unjust.

"She was French, of course," she admitted doubtfully, "but that was not her fault. Frenchmen have souls too, I suppose. A Frenchman's soul must be a mere detail though, for I believe I never heard it mentioned."

Serge shrugged ever so slightly. An inaudible negative animated the languid movement.

"Don't you think any woman but a Russian could ever understand a Russian, or make him happy?" sharply.

"Not unless she comprehended his soul," gently.

"And you think then that two people of a different nationality could not be happy together?"

"Assuredly not," he said gravely. "He would soon weary of her. It is impossible. The stranger heart is not for peace," he laid his finger across his lips as if to silence himself. "Pardon me, I have forgotten myself. My sister told me you are engaged to an Englishman. I heard her, but I did not realise the mind of her words until this moment. I have seen few Englishmen—they are cruel, but they are brave."

"They are admitted to be wonderful soldiers," she said, without enthusiasm.

"Perhaps—but they are husbands, not lovers."

"Perhaps that is just as well for a happy marriage"—suggestively.

"They have no soul," with finality. "Of all men, if I were a woman, I would not marry myself with an Englishman. French, Italian, what you will—only not the English. They are cold—I find them hard. Why do you marry one?"

He had changed to a note of entreaty soft as the love-note of a bird. In spite of herself she felt a queer little thrill run over her.

"I don't insist upon it," she said smiling.

"But you are betrothed to one? Your guardian has consented—"

"Yes; but I have not consented."

"They are a stupid race," he repeated obstinately.

"It is not the race I object to," said Nathalie, "it is my marriage with my cousin Hilary Blount."

"Why are you so fickle? Why do you so soon forget him?" His reproach seemed absolutely sincere. "It is of all traits in women the most sickening to me—the falseness."

"I have not forgotten him. I never intended to marry him."

"Yes, I see you have forgotten him," he contradicted like a naughty child—"I will tell you why. You admire Krasemskin and you delight in his admiration for you. You say to yourself, I will turn the head of these barbarians—even the heart that is promised to another shall not escape me. Women are all alike, mademoiselle."

"What do you mean?" said Nathalie, too astonished at the outburst to be angry. "I have hardly heard your friend Colonel Krasemskin say three words!"

"Ah, but you looked at him—or he would never have dared to ask for your acquaintance at first. And since, you have talked to him. And you have permitted him to look at you. He is not brilliant—really, on my sacred word! And also he is affianced to a Red Cross nurse—his family are raging about it, but he loves her and will not give her up."

"How splendid!" cried Nathalie all alight with romance of it. "Will he marry her soon?"

"Why do you say splendid? Is it a *double entendre*? I tell you that a man you admire is in love with another woman, and you say splendid! No other woman, no Russian woman, would speak so; unless to hide chagrin. You do not show chagrin. You are not pale?" he commented, searching her face with his clair-

voyant gaze. "No—he repeated, no Russian woman would be so false!"

"Not even Mademoiselle Olga, with whom you dance the mazourka so often?"

"Why do you speak of her?" he asked as if sincerely puzzled.

"Because the topic seemed to need another lady in it, and because you seemed to admire her, and she might perhaps be a good model for me while I am in Russia."

Serge smiled his rare dazzling smile. He was at ease instantly.

"Of Olga Mikhaïlovna, it is not important to be jealous, mademoiselle."

"Jealous? What made you think of that?"

"It is a trait all women have in common, and all men recognise. It is only one more way in which to make men suffer. It is not only kings like the unhappy Sobieski for whom such martyrdoms are reserved."

"But what did his handsome Marie do to make him suffer?" she asked, turning back to less personal conversation.

"They had perpetual disagreements," he said, with a face of annoyance, as if such unpleasantness was beneath him to repeat. "When he was given no peace through jealousy of the Polish nobles, she was always parsimonious and imperious with him."

Nathalie listened carefully.

"Probably she was jealous of him herself," she said steadily, "or he was jealous of her."

"He was not of so small and mean a soul!" he assured her positively.

"But I think jealousy is natural—almost a virtue! An accompanying trait of fiery nature!"

"We think it stupid—a weakness," he replied, as if it would not bear argument.

"Oh, no! No! It is not indeed," she cried hotly. "It strikes to the living forces of one's being! It lights all the magic fires. God himself is a jealous God, he especially says so. If one is not jealous one does not love. It is the sure test!"

"It is not noble," he said, turning away, but Nathalie stood staring at Sophie Le Grange as if fascinated.

"You are wrong," she said finally. "Every man and every woman is jealous when they lose their self-control in love. They ought to be. It is a divine sin!"

"I should have known you would be," he remarked indifferently, as if tired of the whole subject. He glanced away from her, out of the window, where the gathering evening was beginning to tinge the garden with the regret of passing day. A last sunbeam smote her like a bright dragger laid across her heart. Her chin was mutinously tilted toward that other foreign woman who was being judged and found wanting by curious standards of behaviour. Her eyes were too thickly veiled by her lashes to hint their intense resentment.

"Yes. I should be!" she retorted proudly. "So would you, if you told the truth. Would you not?"

"Yes—of you."

But Catherine's voice broke in upon them and the caretaker reminded them by his weary return that the day was over and they had yet to see the gardens. As the *crêpuscule* deepened, they wandered about outside between the high, sweet-smelling hedges, while the nightingales began one by one to voice the charm of the hour. Serge and Nathalie strayed a little apart after the first few paths had been exhausted, idled down by

the river bank through low meadows rank with new-mown hay, then back through the dusky avenues, companioned only by ivy-grown statues with mute mouths. They stopped to arrange their wild flowers on half-smothered Alma Tadema benches, overgrown with vagrant roses and glossy ivy, waiting wistful and empty for lovers. Often silent, yet with heightened consciousness of each other, they sauntered through the close-trimmed paths to lean and ponder over the moon dial in the centre of an enclosed square, without shrub or flower to beguile its solitary watch for the coming of the night. The pose, the hour, deepened intimacy. They remembered that in such attitudes immemorial lovers had leaned, and forgotten perhaps. It was a remote and melancholy atmosphere despite the breath of the hay from the meadows along the river, so suggestive of rustic life and content.

"Those haymakers are happier than the exiled inheritors of all this grandeur after all—" said Nathalie, reflectively, involuntarily contrasting the lot of peasant and aristocrat.

"Ah, there is so much of real romance in the small village, with its simple life and joy!" he exclaimed responsively. "At least to our Russian mind—there is. Our poets are full of it. You will read some day what Russian hearts have found to sing of the sentiment of these poor villages—of the soul never to be found in palaces."

"I have felt it without reading what others have felt. Especially when night seems to cover them with soft wings, and repose comes to them after their toil."

"Heaven is near them then—even the meanest. Night

sanctifies, as it softens any scene, however it is not lovely by day. It is Nature praying for her children."

"Do you know any of our English poems about night?"

She repeated slowly, that he might catch her meaning, one of her stars of her own literary heaven; the most perfect poem of night the English language offers. He heard her to the end, then, "Our Lermontoff has said it better," he boasted, and leaning against the green barricade that separated them from the rest of the garden, he began as if alone to recite the words he loved.

"When shadows pale are sinking in hues the twilight weaves

Upon the golden grain fields and gleaming wheaten sheaves,

Upon the emerald pastures and blue of forests deep,
When o'er the sea the silver mists of evening creep;

When 'mid the reeds the swan's head is pillowed 'neath her wings,

The stream to sleep is rocking, light flowing as she sings—

Then to my hut low thatched with golden straw o'er-grown

By frail acacia and leafy oaks I turn.

And there, with greeting holy, in radiant starry crown,
Her scented locks with deepest of purple poppies bound—

And with one dusky gauze enveiled her snowy breast,
The Goddess comes to me with sweet desire of rest.

A faint and roseate fire about my brow she sheds,
Faint mystery of azure upon my eyelids spreads—

Bends low upon my breast her drowsy star-crowned tresses

And on my mouth and eyes the kiss of slumber presses."

There was a long silence neither cared to break.

"How beautiful the world is!" she sighed.

"Yet there are souls that can find no peace in it.

Souls too ardent, too burning for comfort or safety; souls like Tschaikowski and Lermontoff," he added sadly, as if speaking with himself, "souls to whom death or retreat are as a cold hand on a distracted, fever-smitten brow."

Nathalie stared at him, in astonishment.

"You are the strangest combination!" she exclaimed frankly, "a Cossack and a monk! I do not make you out at all. Could you ever find peace in a monastery? Does not life appeal to you?" She wondered what his reply would be, if he would resent her intruding upon his reserve.

"My uncle is in a monastery in the Caucas," he remarked impersonally, "so do not discuss it before my sister. It broke my mother's heart. It is a painful subject to Catherine still. She is afraid always also that I shall follow him. Who knows?" taking refuge in his inevitable exclamation.

"But life is so wonderful!"

"Life is too sad. We Slavs are called children of the shadow. Do not forget it, ever."

They moved away as if to leave the shadows behind them. As they did so she lost step, and cried roguishly, proud of her Russian words, "Napravo! Na levo! Right, left. You do not march very well for a soldier."

"I am not a soldier. *Offizer!*" he replied tersely, mispronouncing the last word with a scornful emphasis, as he corrected her mistake. "For offizers exists another expression I will teach to you, say it after me—*Prikaz!* Such is the command!"

She apologised and they hurried on, fearing to have delayed too long, misled by the light in the open court-

yard. A little ground mole scurried across their path and Nathalie gave a quick cry of panic.

"A mouse! If I lived in this garden I would set traps under every bench!"

"Oh no, mademoiselle, you would not have it killed. Do not kill anything," he entreated her earnestly. "If you had seen as I, how the men and brutes hate death, you could never deprive one least little being of its life. I sob over my horses on the field like a little baby."

Was this the savage Cossack? In comparison with this gentle apologist she must appear a bloodthirsty creature indeed. They stopped again to breathe the hay and roses on the air.

"You are so tender hearted toward animals, I wonder you do not try to do more for the peasants," she said slowly. Instantly his manner changed.

"As to that, we have one very true proverb, 'the heaven is high and the Tsar is far off.'" He had withdrawn himself completely as he spoke. She was not sorry to join the others.

There was something in the voice of Catherine that implied the tête-a-tête with the General to have been prolonged to the point of growing irksome. During all the moonlit drive back Serge was silent. He uncovered dutifully at every shrine by the wayside, and whenever they passed an open church door, where the gleaming cross of gold shone like a taper above the huts nestled about it for protection. Once he pointed out a stork on its rakish nest in the top of a towering tree, outlined against the bright sky, its grotesque figure silhouetted in a deliciously awkward pose. The General too seemed out of mood, and they reached the Bruhlowski so late that he excused himself from entering with them even

for a glass of wine, saying his stately good night at the carriage below. But Serge seemed to be of quite another mind. Flinging conventions of time to the wind after precedent, he followed them up the winding stairway to their apartment, as if it was beyond his power to let Nathalie pass from his sight. Catherine left the salon in search of the English mail in her own rooms beyond, impatient for the weekly letter from her Wanda, leaving them alone.

"You will play it?" Serge suggested—the rising inflection alone saved it from sounding like a command.

"Is it not too late to play in a hotel?"

"Perhaps, I don't know. But if it is late, what has that to do with it? Nitche wo! It is nothing, ça ne fait rien—that is, if you will be so amiable," he amended, opening the grand piano as he spoke. He lighted the candles and turned off the electricity, so the mellow bloom of the half light was shed on her face and figure just to his satisfaction. She seated herself without further urging as if merely complying with her own intention, and began to play half from memory, half improvising, as she ran theme into theme. He stood leaning on the end of the piano where he could watch her face. She knew it, though she did not once raise her eyes from her hands. Once he said—"There must be some French word for touch. There is none in your language, or even in mine, for yours upon the keys."

Gradually, as she let herself go more and more to her music, he crept nearer, until suddenly, finding herself in the midst of the Rubinstein nocturne, she felt his breath, playing on as if under a spell. At the closing note, the night call of soul to soul, he gave a quick cry,

and throwing his arms about her murmured hoarsely, "Star of my soul's night! I answer the call. Princess of dreams, I hear your cry of love and I am on your heart! Let it be night eternal to us!"

She shrank from him, and he shut his eyes as if wincing in sudden pain from a blow.

"Ah, how long before you will be actually mine? Tell me! When, when, when?"

She paled before him. She was unused to passion, and a man is gentler than a boy aroused. Now, he held her by that first unveiling gaze that had unnerved her while yet he was unknown.

"We love—why not obey our natures? Why do you make a play to resist me?" he begged. He opened his arms to her with a gesture infinitely seductive, while those eyes had already taken her to himself. She faltered, would have given herself wholly, save that in a flash she remembered the careless words of the General, and withheld what impulse and desire had already yielded.

"Come—" His word hardly audible, his hands trembling as if in the chill of death, he leaned to her. The odour of tuberose near made her faint, overcame her. Nearer then— "Cruel! How you love to torture me," he breathed, his lips close to hers.

"But it is only the third time we have met!" she faltered weakly.

"Is it? How do you know it?" he asked, drawing back as if hurt. "Have we ever parted? Tell me when? In all these days and nights you have been part of myself: my very inner soul. I had hoped it was the same with you, Madonna. I dreamed that you also felt we were one. Why evade it? And I am glad!

Glad!" he boasted triumphantly. "I am glad I am yours! Come!"

"But you do not know, you cannot be sure—" her lips quivered so that she could hardly protest. Her limbs felt odd and numb, her breath left her throat dry. Her hands were cold and no vestige of the defiant Nathalie remained before this storm of human instinct she had aroused. He gave a scornful shrug of impatience.

"I married you with my first look into your eyes. You know it."

"But you gave me no sign—you did not come for days and days—"

"I did not intend to come—Ever! I went purposely that day after the ball to Otwock so that I could not get back for dinner. The horse I rode to do it is not in service since."

"You did not come to meet us—" she was putting all the broken bits of the past together, a dazed realisation confusing her at every new explanation.

"Does a bird fly toward the guns? Or a fox seek the trap?"

"I did not know—" she began vaguely—"Are you sure?"

"I aim quickly," said Serge proudly, "I know always. I am a fatalist. I love as I fire. I decide without reflection. I saw you. My heart called you. I knew I was yours and I hated my bondage. The Cossack is always ready to fight for his country or his faith—but the woman who makes him her slave, he cannot fight! It was my fate. You might laugh—then I should die, loving no woman. I have given myself to no other. If you want me, I live. If you abandon me, I die unwed.

I shall not think twice. I am a creature like my horse, wild and free. My race is that of those Asra—who love and die!"

By supreme effort of will she was still marble before him.

"I am waiting," he reminded her. "Your heart knows if it wants me or not. It is now for you to speak. There need be no other consideration between us. I am a Cossack of savage blood. My device is to die or conquer. When I am conquered, I die—unless I live at your command, for you. Refuse me, and to-night I leave my regiment forever. But you do not—" for her eyes were hungry as his own, and in them he read her tumultuous awakening from the young girl to the woman. With a sob he sprang toward her, and caught her as if from the peril of a deadly foe; kissing her hair, her shoulders, her bosom. Still trembling beyond control, he dropped to her feet, and covering her as with a shroud of caresses squandered upon a sacred dead form, he slowly arose to his customary contour of haughty command, and lifted her against his breast; pouring out every Russian love-word to name her, between his exclamations of adoration, and giving little moans of ecstasy sharp as pain, until swept by the joy and passion of the Cossack, she lifted her lips to his and silenced him with the wine of life at their crimson brim.

CHAPTER V

NATHALIE'S AVOWAL

THE glittering freshness of early springtide lay over Varsovie. The streets and parks were brilliant with rapid life and movement, while beneath, unheard but persistent, crouched the covert menace and the military answer of Russia to Germany. Nothing abated the silent watch of two vast empires over each other and the possibility of encroachment along that line of solitary frontier lying as an open blade between. The shyness of spring had broken into the assurance of full summer beauty now; the bud lost to the bloom. Nathalie revelled in the mounting colour and fragrance of the gardens. Oh it was wonderful to be young! Young and in love! Was it really the dazzling green of the fresh foliage and turf that lit these radiant emerald mornings? Or was it the eternal illusion—the illusion supreme—the miracle of awakened passion? Did fountains ever make such rainbows in the sun as flashed before their eyes? Even the white swans seemed unconsciously to lend their enchanting suggestiveness to the lyric of the hours in their flight. Every morning with her first awaking, the flowers Serge had chosen were sent to her, to be received in silent rapture. They seemed as incense for his worship, these flowers heavy with perfume, bearing no message but their own, loose bunches of dewy roses, spikes of his favourite tube-rose amid orchids and glossy leaves of the camellia, plumes of white lilac, starry water lilies—all that was most

intrinsically Russian, in prodigal profusion at once oppressive and charming. Sometimes the child fancy of her lover inspired him to fantastic designs, and his florist was ordered to produce a sword of blossoms, or a cannon, once even an artillery waggon gorgeous as the Tsar's most resplendent Uhlan regiment. In his pleasure over each original conception he was the "eternal boy." In his enjoyment of her own beauty he was essentially the man. His delicacy hinted sophistication. That he was an officer in command, he never allowed her to forget. Nathalie, on her side, was no novice in the affairs of the heart. Her fortune had laid her open to frequent attack, leaving her too little ignorance of the varied expression of men's avarice toward herself or her possessions. She had been sought with varied degrees of warmth, but never won to more than a curious interest in the performance. Never had she lost even momentary command of her citadel, until at the attack of this Cossack lover. As the Tartar had entered Europe on horseback, so he had invaded her heart. To him her surrender had been unconditional as it was instant. It amazed her as much as it satisfied her. To be snatched up and carried beyond all landmarks of experience, and held close to a new heaven and a new earth, was the romance of which she had dreamed as she waited. She had refused to compromise. She did not analyse. She accepted—breathless for the next emotion which was never far away. Who could analyse Russia, or one's feeling for a Russian? Too much was always impending, occurring—nothing was long enough at rest to permit of continued observation. Every moment was a crisis! Who could analyse a man's subtler intention, when his mere walk was an event?

Why speculate upon his remoter psychology, when his eyes on meeting hers dissolved speculation in love potions? As well meditate to a brass band! Everything caught and held her senses without giving her mind a chance for the reflective disposition of its crowding material. She felt that the only possible way to formulate or deduce, would be by a deliberate process of reduction; to choose a city, and a street, and a house, and within that house a room, to close the blinds and lock the door, and then when isolated to investigate love and the Russian, Russia would still be there and predominate. And though all the conditions favourable to inward research were granted, the Russian would escape; disqualifying in his simplicity of nature, absorbing by his personal charm to the confusion of all reasoning faculties—an individual drama, too full of action for more than swift admiration on the part of the beholder.

Nathalie felt as if riding at a run, or sailing rail-under-water, beneath crowded canvas. The black and white of the more mental attitudes had no part in the scarlet splendour of the present. It was emotion playing upon the tingling nerves of youth. Why not say it? It was joy! Not the phase of love she had formerly condemned as a prostration of the will and paralysis of the natural—a sort of langour of the spirit to be avoided as endangering health and freedom, but a joy wild and splendid and *barbare*! Not sleepless and pale and shrinking! She felt as if all her life had before stood in relation to reality as a painting of Meissonier to a real battlefield. It is the young girl who hesitates at nothing. Martyrs have been made of such. There is no lost cause where their blood has not been exultantly

wasted. Love is their common opportunity. Nathalie was thrilling to the fulfilment of her destiny and no Greek chorus warned—"Only the rapture must not grow immense. Take care, nor wake the envy of the Gods!"

They had not yet taken Catherine into their confidence. She would have read them at a glance under less constraining circumstances, but now, every effort of her mind and body was exerted in behalf of those suffering soldiers in the far East, while she perfected each detail for her own departure to the front. One afternoon when Serge had been obliged to absent himself, Nathalie, very starry in her happiness, suddenly impressed the elder woman as speaking with a new sweetness in her clear voice. She carried her head with a triumphant poise. What did it mean? Catherine gazed wonderingly at the glowing oval face bent over the correspondence whose countless duties for the regiment taxed them both.

It must have been the intensity of her questioning glance that made Nathalie lift her eyes. In those of her friend she read the mute comprehension. Hastily leaving her unfinished letter, she leaned over Catherine's chair from the back, laying her own flushed cheek against the serious face she was about to illumine with a great happiness. Catherine felt the significance of the caress and drew the clinging arms toward her affectionately, then turning, looked up into the girl's face for confirmation.

"What is it, Nathalie?" she asked tenderly, yet with great gravity instantly perceptible. The answer came fond and yet with difficulty, as if expression had not found itself out yet:

"Catherine, *dorogoi*, Catherine darling," she said

flushing even more deeply, "at last I have begun to be like you!"

Uncomprehending, the Russian still scanned her face. In her own there was a new sternness, a disapproval that might harden to something worse. "What do you mean?" she said.

"I have a Russian lover," Nathalie whispered, as if the secret was too dear to trust upon the common air. Catherine seized her hands with a grip that hurt. "Krasemskin! O the traitor! The false hearted! It will kill Sonia!" she cried as if in actual pain.

"Stop—it is not Colonel Krasemskin."

"Then who?"

"You must know."

"Not Serge!" she cried, and turned very pale.

"Serge!" repeated Nathalie proudly, throwing back her head and walking a few steps away. "And you are not glad! No, you are not even willing!"

The bitter disappointment of the shock drowned even her own exaltation. Catherine looked away from her toward the cathedral visible above the high branches of the garden before she replied—"Forgive me, dearest child, I was overwhelmed."

"No wonder!" cried Nathalie, her colour coming back in a flash. "Of course you think it is unpardonably sudden! I do myself. But for an awful instant I thought there was some more serious objection; that you were going to raise some hideous obstacle, or that you did not love me well enough!"

"Serge took me by storm," she hurried on, with a thrill in her voice when she spoke his name. "He did not take any course of wooing with which I was familiar. He carried me off bodily before I dreamed I was in

danger! He did not stop to lay siege to my heart, he entered and took possession of my soul. I found him there, in command."

Catherine nodded slowly, sadly. "My brother is not of the European soul," she said. "He does not wait. Never! He goes or he stays. He halts his men only to fire. And both he does only on the impulse of the instant. There is no meditation in him. How often I have heard him say—'to contemplate an action weakens my forces.' He is instant, inevitable, eternal."

"I had always been told that Russians were procrastinating. I was off my guard," Nathalie extenuated.

"Serge procrastinates too, like every Russian—but it is in culmination—never in action. When he does not yet wish it—or the time seems to him not fully come—he is, as we say in Russia, 'until summer.' But when his desire is once fixed—pfouff! You will not know you are his target until the smoke clears away over your corpse!"

"Then if it is not because it was indecent to have fallen in love so swiftly with each other, why do you refuse me your blessing?" coaxed Nathalie. "For you do withhold it. How can you resist us? You who are the disciple of a supernatural love, a love at the first glance?"

Catherine kissed the pleading lips, gently but without fervour.

"I seem to see what it involves further on—" she murmured, again letting her glance stray to the cathedral over the tree tops, and rest upon the holy edifice as if for instruction. After a little, returning to the actual as if by an effort of will, she asked:

"Has he spoken? If he has, it was very wrong of Serge. I am very angry with him. But perhaps you have misunderstood him only. The future—"

"There is no future! There never was a future!" cried Nathalie, drawing herself away, defiance in every curve of her body. "I am happy, Serge is happy. Wait until you see him for yourself! We have Now, and we are making the most of it; why drag in the future?"

"His future is too full of promise to dismiss it in a sentence—" But Nathalie interrupted her.

"Oh of course—if you preferred a title for your brother—I have not got it for him. Probably you expected him to marry into the court circle, and you are regretting the match he might have made."

Catherine ignored the accusation of tone and words, replying in her own reasonable way.

"I will not hide from you my own inmost conviction. This is terribly unfortunate. It will mean for you, suffering beyond all your anticipation. For Serge it means ruin."

The girl made an angry motion of dissent and revolt, which was brushed aside by the woman, as she continued in her level voice without warmth or colour, "Your uncle will never give his consent. He will tell you the Russian is invariably unscrupulous and untrustworthy. I know—I know only too well. My Wanda has spent her married life in England and I a part of mine upon the Continent. The English call our purposes unhallowed. They say our agents are everywhere undermining their interests. They call our purest ideals—those fair as the Asiatic sun upon Kasbek—a menace to the peace of Europe! They declare our diplomats lie

by profession, and that our noblest patriots are nothing but careerists. They whisper that from sea to sea, and pole to pole, when a step is heard while vigilance sleeps, and a terrified nation asks 'who goes there?' the muffled answer is always the same—'Russia!' I know—I have heard it all so often!" she ended passionately.

"But that is all history and politics. How does it touch us?" demanded Nathalie.

Catherine rose abruptly.

"There will be no consent to such a betrothal for you. And on our side it is yet more fatal; less to be permitted. It will prove the loss of my brother's military career—perhaps even his honour."

"There might be added glory for his career through me," suggested Nathalie.

"How? You will take his work away from him, and after the first, a man's work means more to him than marriage. I speak the truth only to save you both, not to be unkind, or from any egotism of ambition for him."

"Then I have only brought desolation, and perhaps shame, on you both! And you are not glad to have me for a sister!" She could not believe the mockery that had followed upon her vision of joy.

"I could never have foreseen such a catastrophe," sighed Catherine.

"Then for once, Beloved, you were not clairvoyant, nor even wise or sensible, for who on earth could see him and not lose her mind over him?" cried Nathalie. Catherine's smile was indulgent but unconverted.

A great gilt-dusted bee steered himself through the open window and buried himself in petal after petal of a full-blown red rose on the table between them. Each

waxen leaf quivered at the touch of his vibrant pressure on his passage to the honeyed heart. The rose was for the instant alive, breathing, yielding her last sweet at the imperative law of instinct and nature. Once the bee withdrew clumsily half way out from the enveloping dusks of his paradise—then as if intoxicated beyond reason, sank but deeper within the crimson depths. Neither woman spoke. When, after a few moments of hushed repose, he went his way by the window, they both sighed, as the great rose, with a shudder, let her ravished petals fall.

"Even that!" Nathalie's voice was wistful now. "Catherine, I have never seen a man, before I saw Serge! Never caught a hint of a man's meaning to a woman. Don't laugh at me! You know I have seen more of the world than most girls no older. This is beyond me to control. The rose had to give! It was made to do just that. Serge is the one man for whom I was made."

Catherine shuddered.

"To every woman there is one man; to every man there are many women," she said. "It is not though for you that I shudder. It is a woman's fate—inevitable perhaps. Serge has found his rose. He will not be prevented from its possession. I tremble for my poor boy—afterward. He is a Russian and you are not of his race."

"Also a man is not a bee. You believe I shall weary of him, betray him? You have so despicable an opinion of me as this!" Nathalie's eyes flashed. For a moment in her wounded pride she forgot even the respect due from guest to hostess. "How strange that I could have so misjudged your love for me! I even thought you worthy to be his sister by blood—was eager to see his likeness in you, to find his nature repeated in yours—"

The door opened and Serge, pausing to glance from one to another, entered quietly. He kissed Nathalie's hand, and then going to his sister dropped on one knee before her—his soft hair mutely inclined for the touch of her hand upon his bent head, in blessing and acceptance. A benediction of peace was already stealing over Nathalie's spirit, for she knew his resistless, gentle charm could capture and assuage even sisterly reproach. From the first, struggle against him as she would, storm against his power, fortify herself against surrender, his presence had always subdued her, as it was now undoing Catherine's opposition without a word. It was only a brief interval before the lovers were hanging over her, assured of protection and consent.

"I really have myself to reproach most of all," she admitted, seeing them together in their young beauty and fulness of life and desire. It was not to be expected that you should see each other and not love. You were made for each other, you saw it at a glance. It was so always with us, from my mother—even with Dimitri and me." Her eyes were blind with sudden tears.

"It was inevitable unless we were born blind!" protested Nathalie.

"It would have been a deadly sin toward heaven!" echoed Serge.

It seemed to Catherine as flame leaping toward flame, they turned to each other; he in his light summer uniform which heightened his high colour and dusky hair, Nathalie with her animated brilliant little face, whose beauty of feature was lost in the vivid life of the spirit portrayed therein, as she vindicated her right to her passion for the man who was so plainly her fate.

"I have warned you, my children," said Catherine, as if for the last time. "Serge, little brother, you have the Anglo-Saxon spirit yet to learn! And you, Nathalie, remember too, that he has been from his youth in command."

"Under an Emperor, not all unworthily, now under an Empress infinitely more dear, and to be obeyed," he said softly, as he bent to kiss the edge of her lace sleeve without raising his eyes.

"One must learn to serve before one commands—I do not forget it!" she confessed, and kissed his hair close to the temples untanned by the sun of the field, unmindful of Catherine. Serge blushed desperately at the caress. His feeling was too sacred to endure its manifestation before another. Slight as it was, the incident did not fail to make an impression on the sister, confirming her certainty of a thousand stumbling blocks to come.

"Have you considered the difference in your religion, Serge?" she asked as if deploring a necessity.

"Religion would never keep me from Serge one instant!" flashed Nathalie.

"What is to happen to us after death is way off in the never-never land. What is now alone concerns us, while we are here, and alive. I want to marry Serge and make him happy, not formulate a new article of faith. When we are dead, the creeds may quarrel over us as much as they like! If Serge wanted me to turn into a fire-walker of Tahiti, it would only be another chance to prove the unimportance of everything except his wish in the matter."

"But the Church of Holy Russia demands more," objected Catherine, not in the least moved by this

abandonment of all professed religions for love. She turned her startled eyes upon her brother, as if to protect him from listening to such avowed heresy. Nathalie would not be silenced.

"Well, if the Church of Holy Russia thinks the salvation of our lives or our souls depends on anything but love, and all love teaches and bestows, your creed is far more bigoted than ours."

Serge was pacing rapidly up and down with his light even tread of the jungle. He continued for a few moments in silence and then, stopping before Nathalie, asked abruptly:

"Are you baptised already?" If he had asked if she had been vaccinated or was rich or over twenty it would have less amazed her.

"Of course," she said, with some slight resentment, her lip curling just a trifle, and utterly at a loss to account for his question.

"That is very well, he said frankly, "for my church would not permit me marrying with a heretic. You must embrace some faith."

"I am a Unitarian," said Nathalie, inwardly convulsed with laughter. Serge and Catherine exchanged unenlightened glances. It was Catherine who spoke.

"I think I have heard of it from the American Consul. It is a sect," she explained. "It is found only in America. I believe it is quite recognised and does not permit moral irregularities like some others."

"It does not permit but one wife, if you are afraid of confusing it with the Mormons," retorted Nathalie. But Serge persisted in addressing his inquiry to his sister.

"It is not Catholic, you are sure, Catherine?" He was really troubled.

"No. On the contrary, it is a sect without sacraments."

"No?" in polite incredulity. "But if it is not Catholic, it will not prevent us, if she is willing to be baptised. I could not expect to be granted a dispensation to marry with a Catholic. You are sure about this?" turning to Nathalie for confirmation.

"I am more than sure, as to that point," she remarked dryly.

"But where, and by whom, were you baptised?" he persisted as if rather dubious still.

"When I was a baby, in a house on Beacon Hill, in Boston. I have not the least recollection who performed the service."

"It is strange you do not know about your own religion," he said, mystified. He walked a few times back and forth, and then, as if still ill at ease, he turned to her more than ever perplexed by the situation in which they found themselves.

"You will pardon me if I ask one other necessary question," he begged, "but were you regularly born, of married parents? My government will demand the certificate of your birth. It would never permit me marrying with a woman of irregular parentage. It is an obligation of my rank, you understand."

Her rising colour ought to have warned him. A sharp rebuke rose to her lips, but remembering how innocently he had offended she checked the impulse to be scathing, saying seriously, quite as seriously as he had spoken:

"Yes, Serge. I am quite respectable. My father was governor of his State, and my mother was a daughter of

one of the most distinguished judges who ever made the laws of a great republic."

"To Americans, of course, Galubka, that is of importance," he said with his sweetest expression of devotion, "but for us there is nothing important but that you are not a heretic. So I ask you, I terribly beg of you, send for your certificate of birth and baptism immediately."

The wheedling note convinced her that he realised how disagreeable the demand was to a free and equal American. She faced the predicament unflinching, once for all. He was a *dévôte* and *bon viveur* at once. To him she appeared a riteless pagan. He crossed himself before every shrine. She obeyed the unseen mandates of conscience alone. With him the Faith was a superstition. To her it was the means to character evolved. He would kneel from habit. She would offer the sacrifice of her own will. He would give her up without an open struggle if his church actually forbade their union. She would of her own will risk her soul for him in spite of every creed, trusting, knowing that love is the fulfilling of the divinest law. Puritanism liberated and Europeanised Islamism—how were they to meet or understand? What would be the outcome if what he believed was nothing to her, and what she demanded of conduct an unknown speech to him? Only love could hope to be mighty enough to pilot such an adventure.

Catherine saw with a mingling of satisfaction and despair that they would never regard their love a tragedy, however clearly it appeared so in her impartial eyes. As little as the leaping flame itself cared they for the ashes that would be blown in the track of their triumphant passing. Tradition, honour, ambition, would all perish unaccounted in the onrush of temporary elation.

CHAPTER VI

AN AMERICAN PROMISE

THE first clash of the East and West was not long in coming. Although it was a trifling occurrence it came near bringing the end of the end in its wake, as indeed it well deserved, trifles being proverbially more important in matters of the heart than epoch-making events.

"I terribly don't want to go," Serge repeated. It was at least the hundredth time he had said it in a half hour. The afternoon was languid and the shaded salon beneath the awnings of the Bruhlowski far more attractive to him than a hot ride to camp and his duties there. Nathalie hated equally to have him go; considered that his early morning drill was sufficient gift of his day to his country. Thus far the result had been becalming. It did seem a pity to spoil the perfection of the hour, with its open book and the odours of jasmine on the sultry air.

"I awfully—terribly don't want to go," he said again.

"Go, then, so as to come back sooner," she suggested.

"I will look forward to that, and back to this, and cheat the time in between out of its existence."

"The coming back is good," he agreed, "if I did not have to go first."

"Now you really are talking nonsense," she said. "I begin to think it is all a ruse—you have no idea of going."

"And you find it is not easy to forgive me for not going, when I cannot help it?"

She shook her head. "The only thing I could not forgive would be your coming to me when you could help it."

He had been walking toward the door and back already a countless number of times. Now she stretched her hand toward him in protest against this nervous tramping up and down.

"It is too hot to march to-day," she expostulated, "especially for an officer of cavalry."

He took her hand in his and, still clasping it, paced back and forth in the limited space left him within her reach; a few steps in one direction, then retracing them to wheel and repeat the motion. The constant turning, of which he seemed unaware in his intense preoccupation, almost made Nathalie giddy.

"You make me think of the striped tiger in his cage when you do that, Serge," she declared, with a smile for their mutual preference for that animal.

"I don't want to go," he objected.

"Don't go! I am sure I don't want to have you."

"I have my service. I must. But this little salon is like what we say of Russia, 'The gates are wide for those who enter, but narrow for those who would go out.'"

"What time will you be back?" she asked idly.

"At six."

"At six? If you ride both ways?"

"Well, at least at seven or so," he qualified.

"Surely by eight?"

"Probably."

"For dinner without fail?"

"Without any doubt—that is, if you like to go out with me to some one of our little favourite places?" He

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kissed her hand and, without letting it slip from his grasp, looked about for his cap.

"Prekraz! It is commanded!" she reminded him as he sighed dismally.

"What will you do to amuse yourself all these three hours alone?" he asked.

"Lie in the chaise longue and think of you; perhaps fall asleep and dream of you."

He scrutinised her face shrewdly.

"I am almost sure Krasemskin will call to pay his homage to Catherine," he remarked indifferently. "But you are weary and you will need to refuse yourself to him. Let me see you established before I go."

She watched him while he arranged the chair in the shadiest corner of the room, where the air blew in freshest when it stirred at all, and leaned back upon the cushions he placed for her so luxuriously with a fluttering sigh of comfort.

"Poor tired Dushenka," he murmured, "you are all worn out," though her bright colour and animated face gave the lie direct to his solicitude. "Rest a little," he said soothingly, "and when you awake I will be here. Close your eyes, or I shall not be able to go."

She obeyed his caprice and supposed him gone, but he stooped and kissed her hair. Then, hearing the door opened she ventured to uncloset her eyes. He glanced back and met her roguish smile.

"Absolutely impossible for me to go now," he declared, laying his gilt-emblazoned cap on the nearest chair and returning to her side in a leisurely manner as if he had just come in instead of just taken his departure.

"What is it? What brought you back?" she cried,

sitting straight up in her chair and hoping some new plan had occurred to him or that he had remembered he need not go, or had mistaken the day.

"There! I was absolutely sure you would not remain as I had left you," a troubled expression spreading over his face; "you promised you would sleep."

"I am really not a bit tired, and I never sleep in the day," protested Nathalie, "but I did promise to stay here, and I will. What I say I will do; I always do." Again she resigned herself to the superfluous care in the arrangement of the cushions and allowed herself to be disposed of as a fragile, precious object of his love.

"Promise, Dushenka!" he pleaded in his sweetest voice, a hint of pain in his soft eyes.

"I have heard that Russians do not always keep promises," she began.

"No," he agreed promptly, "but Americans always do. Americans even in war, even in a bad business, make always as they have said. Promise!" he urged. "It is not hard; it is such a little thing to do."

"But an American does not promise easily. It is best to be careful how you make a promise if, when it is promised, you have obliged yourself to do a certain thing, whether it turns out to be easy or not."

"Will you promise to stay here just as you are till I come back? Will you do this one thing for me?" he urged, disregarding argument as usual.

"Just to show you how I can keep an American promise?"

"No; just to show that you love me." Her beautiful curved lips drew his own, insatiable. When he lifted himself from her embrace he picked up his cap and strode toward the door; reaching it, he returned as

hastily. "I had forgotten an almost necessary conversation I must have with you; I ought to have said it before," he explained. His face was serious to a frown.

"Dear my Soldier, if you ought to be at the camp, I must not let you stay. You must tell me to-night, at dinner. Really, I don't want your General to think hard things of me. My soldier must not desert, even for me; I am too proud of him."

"It is of greater importance than my service out there," he assured her gravely.

"How can it be? What is it about?" she asked, beginning to be impressed by his manner.

"It is this. I need to explain to you in Russian: *Ia lublu vas uz hazno*, I love you terribly!"

"That is not conversation, that is exclamation!" she retorted gaily. For a moment she had the instinct to resist his mounting passion—only an instant, and in vain. Then the tides of her young nature swept her into his arms. She felt him through her entire being, as he flung himself on his knees before her, enslaved and adoring.

The pale sea-green draperies of her filmy summer frock heightened the whiteness of her beyond the leaping colour he had lit in her blush; and the amber eyes that to-day could hide nothing of their consent to him as he drew them beneath the surface of his gaze, drowned him deeper than ever before in their mystery of desire. In her agitation, faint under the implacable thirst of his eyes, her bosom was cramped by her swift breathing, rising and falling beneath the light lace that clung to her lithe slenderness, until he dared not trust himself to look upon her, or hold her, and his head fell upon her breast, where her heart shook beneath him as light leafage in a

summer gust, while he clenched his hands and let the abyss of forgetfulness take him.

She intoxicated him, this girl of the West! This beautiful feminine creature who tempted him without fear, who had already in spirit, if not in reality, given herself to him. She was only waiting to bestow more fully her independence, her pride, her beauty, her last reserve upon him. He dared not leave her even for an hour! The sweetest dreams always ended with cruellest awakening! He ached with the strain of fierce self-control and was shaken by the power of his native jealousy.

Suddenly Nathalie felt his mood relax. He withdrew himself from her, saying in a cold voice she had never heard him use before, even to his soldiers, "You have given me your sacred American promise not to leave your chaise longue until I return." And without a glance he was gone, leaving her spent with her own excitement and pale enough now in truth to warrant repose.

As Serge performed the mechanical duties of the afternoon all the savage Cossack in him felt the restraint he had imposed upon himself. This freedom of intercourse with a woman was new to him. It overturned his reason sometimes, this unforbidden nearness to the girl who had taken possession of him in spite of his struggle to be free. It was a captivating novelty, but a perpetual strain as well. Inevitably their marriage must be soon. He could not bear it. He could not trust himself. And to-day he had an impression for the first time that under European training there might be an untamed strain in the American blood that had set that heart of hers racing beneath his own like the wild horses of the steppes. Like what had their hearts beat together if not the mad ring of Cossack hoofs in attack?

And Nathalie, meanwhile, was living it over and over, as women will. Her imagination was lit and burning. To those who get Russia in their blood it is like wildfire! She let herself go out to the unknown, that seemed to have always been a part of her inmost being. She had never been loved best by any one before. She had longed with the ardent unreasoning dream of a lonely child to give all to a love that wanted all. God was so good! and so wonderful to have given her just this great, overmastering answer to her unspoken prayer! She did not understand the unnerving quality of her experience, but she was content not to question or analyse. Serge swept her where he willed. So long as he loved her, her love for him must increase, life be without a flaw. Even if he hurt her, she knew she should not shrink. In the delirium of her innocent infatuation she combined the daring of fallen angels and the purity of American girlhood. The carnival of the sense found her ignorant, but apt. As her pulses calmed she began to count how many ways she loved him. There were a score of reasons ready at her call. She loved him for his mouth. She could not visualise it without an effort yet. It often defied the attempt for hours in his absence. She loved him for not wanting to love her, and succumbing as a rebel. She loved him for the way he held himself aloof from all questions of money. She believed that he never realised it affected him, even remotely. He excluded her from her fortune absolutely. He was probably unpractical in the extreme. Army men never did seem to know about money. She had heard him tell his soldier to pay certain charges as if he had commanded a repulsive task of menial labour. She would sooner have tried to explain the value of her fortune to one of his blooded Orlanoff

horses than to this haughty flower of his empire's protection.

It was not quite six when Catherine's maid, Nitchka, was sent to say that she was asked for, and would she please come and have tea in the other salon without delay.

"I am so sorry," said Nathalie, at a loss to excuse herself, "but I cannot join madame for tea this afternoon. I hate to trouble her, but ask her if she will come here for just a minute, if she can, if it is possible for her to leave her visitors."

The maid left with a dissatisfied expression, as if fearing she had not rightly understood the message, and soon after Catherine herself entered hastily.

"Are you suffering, dear?" she began, but a glance at Nathalie's face reassured her. "How you frightened me!" she laughed. "I was afraid you were ill. Krasemskin is here and young Count Malindorff of the Hussars. You need not make a toilette, but please come at once. It is not our Russian etiquette to seem without welcome for a guest," she explained.

In a few words Nathalie revealed her position of captivity, at which Catherine only laughed impatiently.

"That is no excuse, dear child. Serge would never expect you to consider it one."

"Perhaps he will be here in a few minutes," temporised the victim.

Catherine laughed again. "He cannot return before nine at best. It is his inspection to-day. Come, don't disappoint us. These are his friends, especially Krasemskin. You are only doing what is necessary to be polite in receiving them hospitably."

"I promised him," objected Nathalie.

"With a kiss!" interpolated Catherine. "Come, Galubshka, really, this is nonsense, you know. Count Malindorff is the handsomest officer in Varsovie, and Colonel Krasemskin is always repeating charming speeches of his about you. No Russian has any idea of time. Serge would be the first to beg you to accept your honourable release."

"If it were anything else," she pleaded, uncomfortable in Catherine's displeasure. "How can I begin by breaking my promise to Serge, even if it does turn out to be a useless one, even if it is a silly promise that does not matter in itself?"

"You do not break it in spirit, dear. It was only play on my brother's part, no doubt. A little lover's game that you have taken too seriously. Serge knew perfectly well that both these men were coming to tea with us to-day. He knew equally well that you could not be so rude as to refuse yourself to his friends. You would only make him ridiculous by persisting in this childishness."

"To me a promise, any promise, is sacred," she insisted, but Catherine's soft voice covered her own.

"In a promise one must always reserve the right to one's own judgment. If the hotel burnt this afternoon would you still remain where you are?"

"Of course not."

"Come, then, or if you are really indisposed I will express to them your regret, and say you are suffering from the effect of the sudden heat."

"In the first place, the house is not on fire," Nathalie reminded her, "and it would not be honest to say I am ill, for I am perfectly well. But I cannot come because I promised Serge, and I was taught by my father that one had no right to interpret a promise after it was

made. I do hate to refuse you, dearly beloved Catherine. Nothing but a promise to Serge could make me refuse you anything in the world."

"We have a proverb that fits your profession exactly," said Catherine. "'Don't promise me the ibis in the sky, give me the sparrow in your hand.' I think Colonel Krasemskin would be entirely justified in setting the hotel on fire to see what would happen!" It was an unusually sharp retort for Catherine. As she left the room she exclaimed, without a smile to soften her annoyance, "It is inconceivable, Nathalie, and it makes Serge seem tyrannical, which is always ridiculous."

"I am sorry," deplored Nathalie contritely, "but to me it is a matter both of principle and sentiment."

It was too bad to be obliged to miss the tea hour, the most delightful of the day. She listened until she heard vaguely from the further salon the undertones of Catherine's rich, warm modulations and the punctilious accents of Krasemskin. Then the wonderful abundance of the Russian tongue impressed her as others apparently entered and the conversation grew more eloquent and absorbing. She was not within reach of book or bell. She began to listen for Serge. Every step deceived her into believing he had returned. It would be less stupid to pass the time by getting dressed for dinner. She wanted to put on a gown suitable for the cool evening air in the open cafés they always preferred. She laughed at herself for her folly in not doing so, but some inexplicable power restrained her. She derided herself for her feeling, but she could not bring herself to get out of the chair where Serge had asked her to remain. It was nonsense. Catherine had said so, and Catherine was the infallible saint of her calendar. But her holding, or not

holding, to her word meant so much to her, meant everything. Even if the act was in itself intrinsically the mere stupid turning of a jest into earnest, yet if one kept one's faith only when it was convenient and agreeable how was another to be sure of one's word? Surely the shadowy spirits of her ancestors must have smiled a pitying and comprehending smile at the little martyr their Puritan consciences had immolated after so many generations!

It grew dusk, almost dark. The callers had left the salon of Catherine and the café downstairs was coming to life with the first diners. Nathalie's pride was sustaining her now. She refused Catherine's kindly disapproving offer to have dinner there with her, in captivity, or even to have her dinner sent up, since she would not dine below with the General and his wife, as they had both been engaged to do previous to this freak of the inquisition. The whole episode fretted Catherine more than any experience since the declaration of their fond friendship.

"But how can I go down and dine, leaving you alone here like this?" she had complained a dozen times. "Serge will forever reproach me, and too justly."

"Don't be vexed with me, Catherine. That is all the responsibility you have in the matter. Serge and I have got to learn to understand each other in our own way. Leave me to finish what I have begun."

"You will not venture a scene with him. Let me warn you Serge is an adept there. You will not surprise him or prostrate him by that course. He is obstinate under provocation, as you are under what you call principle."

"I don't wonder you call me obstinate." The amiability of her confession touched the older woman to immediate

response. "But though I presume it sounds silly to you, I want Serge to realise that I am absolutely true and absolutely his. If he wants me to do something, whether I consider it silly or not, I will do it for him, if I promise. We have walked round the world into each other's arms. We are the meeting of the East and West. We have found each other and I am sure God meant us to do more than merely find."

"You strange child, what have you been thinking of here alone for hours?"

"Of the past chiefly," she said.

Catherine's face darkened, saddened.

"Ah! the past," she murmured. "The past is a country where no two explorers have ever raised the same landmarks or recovered the same territory, or settled upon the same lines of limiting frontier. You and Serge will never meet in the past. It would be wiser to dream only of the future."

Left again to the shadows and the distant sounds of corks and tantalising hum of voices, Nathalie found that heroism could not quiet hunger. She was hungry in spite of principle. She was rapidly growing nothing else, unless it was obstinate.

It was not until a few minutes before ten that Serge, knocking upon the door of her own small salon and hearing no permission given to enter, pushed the door slightly ajar, and from the darkness believed himself to be alone. He crossed the presumably empty room to that of Catherine, adjoining, but as he did so he stumbled over a chair and struck a match to prevent a second mishap. As the light flashed up he received a shock such as few Cossack officers receive until a bullet enters the breast or a shell explodes at their feet. Like one in the cold dread

of a supernatural vision he stared at the girl sitting motionless in her chair where he had left her. If he hoped she was asleep he was instantly undeceived, for her eyes were wide open, staring straight before her.

"Nathalie!" he gasped, "what does it mean? For God's sake, speak to me! Are you gone mad? Why are you here alone in the darkness? Where is Catherine? What terrible thing has happened to affright you out of your senses? O my poor, poor darling, you are ill, you have the fever!"

She watched him flood the room with light and rush off to Catherine's room for wine, but as he lifted it to her lips and was about to support her head as one would that of an invalid, she remarked casually, "Good-evening."

"Nathalie!" he begged. "What is it? You are gone out of your senses. Why? Or why do you play a theatre scene with me? What has brought you to this mind?"

"An American promise." She spoke calmly, as if it was a matter of course.

"But Catherine—surely she told you I should be late. She explained to you it is Thursday, and on that day I must be delayed by many things beyond my regular duty of inspection."

"No one could explain to me a reason for breaking a promise when once I had made it to you," she said impassively.

Serge stared at her. She did not smile or cry, nor did she look flushed and angry. He was prepared for hysterics and adopted tactics of counter reproach.

"And you are angry with me? You think I ought to be killed that I did not neglect my service that you sent me to do by saying you were proud of me! Probably you

think I ought to desert my most sacred duties, to desert my career for you! Oh, no doubt of it! Women are all so unreasonable. You will not speak one word to me. You think it is my fault. You blame me. You think—but you do make a mistake. I will resign my service. I will devote myself to you only. If you think——”

“I think only that I am hungry as the Russian bear,” she cried with a gay little laugh, springing up from her chair and giving a long gasping breath of physical relief. He caught her to him.

“And you think nothing more? No evil of me?” He was incredulous of such a blissful outcome of a grave dilemma.

“Nothing—except that forever more we understand the difference between a Russian and an American promise.”

“But I knew that before. I explained it to you,” he began; then as she pouted he realised the catastrophe was but narrowly averted, and stood before her deferentially as a soldier awaiting orders. “May I kiss you?” he asked. “Is it permitted?”

“It is commanded,” she replied, “but not until I have had my dinner.”

A command that was honoured in the breach.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE NEVSKI PARADE

Cossack speeds ever toward the North,
Cossack has never heart for rest,
Not on the field nor in the wood,
Nor when in face of danger pressed
His horse the raging stream must breast!

Cossack hastes ever toward the North,
With him a mighty power brings,
To make the honour of his land
Cossack his life unheeding flings—
Till Fame of him eternal sings!

Cossack brought all Siberia
At foot of Russia's throne to lie,
Cossack left glory in the Alps,
His name the Turk can terrify—
His haughty flag he carries high!
From "MAZEPPA."—PUSHKIN.

It was after an exquisite dinner given in Nathalie's honour at the *Europeische Hof* that the Cossack General paused, with a lighted match half way from his elaborate gold case to his cigar, to inquire, "Would it perhaps please you, mademoiselle, to see a Cossack drill to-morrow morning?"

Remembering the distance to the summer camping, some seven miles away, and the condition of the roads beyond the city boulevards after the constant rain of several days previous, leaving a sea of mud almost impassable between, Nathalie hesitated, not wishing to put

Catherine to such expenditure of effort in her behalf. Serge was listening eagerly for her reply.

"If Madame la Generale was not too jealous of every moment wasted—" she began, as if hoping her scruples might be overborne.

The General relighted his cigar, drank another petit verre from the forest of dainty glasses before him, this time selecting very old Benedictine, and declared, as he refilled it to her health with a motion of youthful bravado, "In that case I will march the entire regiment into town and drill them for you on the Nevski Parade at ten, if you like?" Now, Nathalie was a wise maiden, having learned that Russians offer their utmost as the Arab offers his horse, but being as yet unversed in the power of a Russian to drink forever without evident increase of warmth, she suspected the after-dinner Alpine glow might be rising in the veins of the gallant General. She glanced at Catherine for some wordless signal. Should she offend by refusing or prove herself no woman of the world by presuming to accept? From Serge she forced only a brilliant glance of admiration, which was but the more confusing. Shakespeare's advice occurred to her:

"Oft expectation fails and oft it hits
Where hope is coldest and despair most fits."

This unexpected ovation might really be intended in earnest, without mental reservation; so while she could not believe it in the least probable, she thanked him glowingly and gave her promise to be on the parade ground punctually at ten, without seriously expecting to distinguish there the General's stalwart shoulders unbent by their weight of gold epaulets, the bright blue coat with its superb decorations, and the glistening cavalry boots

tipped off with the silver spurs that are always the last distinction of the cavalry officer—to his mind one of many, be it confessed. The dinner was gay without being noisy. The men outdid each other in compliment to the American guest. The mounting flattery was consummated by the General's invitation. What was left for the rest of them but to say good-night enviously? He escorted Nathalie to the carriage, preceded and followed by a group of overawed waiters, who supposed her at least to be a new actress at the Variété to merit such exalted attention, until their ignorance was speedily rebuked by a knowing garçon, who said with a shrug, learned in a café at Brussels, "Actress? nyet. American-ski. Rich!" which only increased their curiosity in the stranger's distinguished departure.

As the carriage rolled away Nathalie turned to Serge to vent her repressed perplexity.

"What ought I to have said? Did he mean it?" she begged, "or was it only a Russian compliment? I did not understand if it was to be taken as an invitation or not."

"Who knows? It would be a demonstration for a princess, even for the Empress herself," said Serge, much impressed by the magnitude of the affair. "First the Commander of all troops must give permission, and yet," opening his gloved hands as if laying all before her, "you are an American woman!" The flattery of his insinuation was extreme.

She was awakened the next morning by a rapid knocking and the excited voice of Nitchka bade her dress quickly, as the horses of the General would be at the door before ten. The General's own servant had been sent to announce it. Mademoiselle must be ready to the

moment. General Nyaslanoff had himself commanded all.

Nathalie was out of bed and at her toilette in an instant, dressing as rapidly as possible, scarcely daring to stop to drink her coffee in dread of disgracing herself before military punctuality. Catherine, equally breathless, tying her veil and giving her gloves a distracted twist to counteract an unwonted crookedness due to haste also, met her in the hall as she ran down to the street door.

"I never saw you in the least flurried before," she cried. "I believe you are excited too."

"It is really unprecedented. This proves what an impression you have made. Are you satisfied now, my little Amerikanski?" she asked happily.

"It is all for you and for Serge that he is doing it, and I am only afraid it is a troublesome compliment for you at this hour in the morning," she replied, rather oppressed by the eventfulness of the occasion apparent in the manners of the servants and Catherine's rigid behaviour, as if at command of royalty.

"Let me look at you. Yes, you are correct," and she gave the nod that was a signal to the attendants to stand back as the horses sprang forward.

"I have been presented at Court, but that was insignificant and commonplace in comparison with this. Think of meeting a whole regiment! You will have to tell me how to act," chattered Nathalie, rather apprehensively. But once out on the Ujasdowska Allée she forgot her fears. They flew along as on wings of the morning, whirled forward by the General's magnificent black horses, the coachman merely directing their fleet course by the reins lying loose on those uncurbed arching necks, where the veins were visible in a pulsing network

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through their glossy sable coats. Their shining limbs were all untrammelled by the light Russian harness and the freedom of their motion was that of wild beauty on its native steppes. It was a morning of high blue sky and scudding clouds, allowing the fugitive sunlight to escape and flare at intervals, like trumpet calls, across the radiant atmosphere below. As they drove out upon the vast, arealess field, their horses restive from the cracking of infantry practice on all sides, what a panorama lay spread before them!

Away off to the left, overrun by drilling infantry, the dull outlines of earthworks rolled brown against the horizon. Behind them lay a summer camp; its white tents nestling under gracious foliage, its flags romping merry on the breeze. On their right rifle smoke was rising blue from the ground, where companies fired regularly, lying low on the sod, bodies pressed down, one arm outstretched to aim the rifle, one leg raised slightly to ease the position, the usual method. Across one corner of the field other companies were marching back to camp, their drilling done for the time. These were singing as only Russian soldiers sing. They sang the songs of victory, of conflict, the songs they sing when they have left their comrades dead upon the field; the songs with which they cheer themselves upon the march; each white linen blouse covering a pair of lungs that for the honour of his company strove to drown out the lusty chorus of the company before and the company behind. Morning, peace, soldier boys in white singing as they marched, but to Catherine's heart, at least, involuntarily contrasted with a picture less debonair. Alas! no less a reality at the very moment.

But now, dead ahead, the horizon line was suddenly

defined by a solid wall of moving Cossack horse; a living forest of lance and man. Before them in a vivid group rode the General with his blue flag, surrounded by his officers, among them, Serge. At their own approach the signal for "Attention" was given. Such men as had dismounted leaped into the saddle. The trumpeters on their white horses, stationed at precise distances apart, raised their melodious challenge simultaneously with the hoarse "*Na pravo!*" (Right face.) It sounded more like a cannon flash than a human utterance. The General raised his naked sword high. The very air seemed to thin with excitement. They were off! "A waving field of lovely armour, the chased edgings running like lines of sunlight from side to side." Nathalie forgot to breathe as she leaned forward to follow every consecutive movement of that undulating monster created from a thousand Cossacks moving as one. At first they slant in columns; a serpentine uncoiling of horse and steel without a suggestion of individual motion. They break, unite, advance, retreat as if but parts of a mighty machine, or as victims of an overwhelming magnetism. There is only one will for a thousand. They weave their deadly arabesque as lightly as a shadow passing over the grass. They halt with the precision of an orchestra leaving a perfected chord. They wheel in a rhythm so continuous, so serene, one becomes conscious of the music of silent motion. They advance like crested breakers upon the shore, then widen their forces in an unbroken line, until as the spent waves of a summer sea they reach out on a distant strand, vague and remote. There is an absolutely melting grace in those animal bodies—that hot mass of life under the control of a single human will. Now they are tense, rigid, supremely warrior and

war-horse. Again they are relaxed and fluttering away as the limp folds of a giant flag in the caress of a languid zephyr. There is absolute silence, save for the golden blast of the trumpeters, repeated from one to another, caught up and tossed on before echo can play tricks with its import, or distance muffle its clear message—imperious and imperial, yet wafted sweet upon the morning here, as if Orpheus himself did but greet the dawn! Upon Nathalie the impression of their power of deliberation was predominant, until they began to come nearer, and the beat of four thousand hoofs on the wet grass hurried her heart to a mad gallop. Wilder than the leisurely bugle call became that crushing of the turf, intoxicating her senses. Now they swept on, carried away by the lust of death and glory, and some wild impulse broke loose in her blood to follow. A madness of motion was compelling her to join their heady onrush. She knew not, cared not, to what end; only to be a part of that blind whirlwind of supernatural destruction! Beyond the subjective passion of a woman to give or receive was this impersonal, crazing desire, that lifted a human being beyond all known confines of her previous world and carried her on and away. The spirit of Mazeppa had caught her and bound her to the saddle. Her fancy was kidnapped as were the women destined to carry on the Kazak race in the savage legends of the past.

When they were all gone, flying in a stately cloud, she caught her breath over a dry throat. The first exercise was over, and the General trotting his horse soberly in their direction. She was suddenly appalled by the gulf that stretched between Serge and all the men she had ever known in England. Of course she

could not understand him! He was of such stuff as burned Moscow! She stared at the General as if dazed when he saluted her. She felt too stunned by it all to focus her impression at once.

"I feel as if we ought to parley, not talk!" she cried excitedly, when he turned from Catherine to her. "I ought to have a cocked hat and a map of Europe in hand, and a squint like Napoleon, while you dictate terms to me."

"And as you are not the great Napoleon, it remains for me not to parley but surrender," said the General.

He extended his sword as if in defeat. They chatted on in compliments, Nathalie staring fascinated at the Cossack soldier with his rakish left ear curl, who was holding the General's chestnut mount, Petronius, named for the hero of *Quo Vadis*, written, he explained, by his good friend.

"What a beauty!" cried the girl with an intelligent eye for each good point. "He is flawless, even to his four white feet!"

"Always the four white feet, if possible, in a Cossack horse," he replied, pleased by her notice of his favourite. "Though our proverb declares that 'even the horse with four white feet can go lame.'"

One by one he summoned his officers for introduction. Each in turn galloped smartly across the grass, to salute, dismount, and express a few words of satisfaction in her delight. They spoke in French or German to Nathalie, to Catherine, the mother tongue so dear to them all. Serge in his turn comported himself exactly as his brother officers: impersonal, to the glory of Russia! His salute was if possible stiffer, his carriage haughtier. His entire manner staccato as the rattle of musketry, as he

remarked with an assumption of official indifference, "You like it? It interests you? Wait only! You will see a Cossack regiment make an attack. After that you will pity what comes in its way." The passionate moment seemed always his. Made tangible and evident it lived in him, came and went in him, an incarnate reality. He impressed it upon her to-day as never before. The thrill of him was inexplicable but insistent.

A few minutes of motionless calm ensued after they had all ridden off again. The Cossack boasts that "God owns the brave," but when that whole regiment wheeled and tore down upon them on a dead run, lances outstretched, Nathalie felt she should pity the Almighty were his heavens so imperilled. Other manœuvres followed quickly, half the force attacking while half as reserves rushed down from the rear to double the volley. The horses bore the firing well, which being accomplished with one hand while the other must always grasp the lance, leaves the wild little trooper his head at the critical moment. The last exercise was a marvel of finesse and execution. In response to the lifted sword, once more the trumpeters blew their signal and all the motionless regiment broke ranks, scattering aimlessly as drifting leaves, just rippling, rustling, blowing along the ground at the caprice of the wandering airs. They dawdled in and out, a sort of equestrian reverie or graceful improvisation till it seemed to be all over. Then a trumpet called, another answered, and another, and scarcely were they still before every rider had wheeled into position, and the unbroken ranks at their peculiar swinging gait were advancing solid, to salute in farewell.

"Dangerous?" repeated the General, on hearing

Nathalie's outburst of applause and terror. "Dangerous? Why, of course! The life of a Cossack is in his own hands every minute. The peace of a Cossack is as full of peril as the war of common soldiers. The glory of Russia is blood-bought!"

Her spirit lifted to the audacity of it, but her fears misgave her for her lover.

Giving his horse to his soldier, the General entered their carriage and bade Serge do the same. They drove rapidly past the marching line, at whose head, by especial favour, were the buglers and brass band, playing as surely none but a Russian military band could ever play. At a signal from their host to the leader, the march changed to a waltz; a dreamy melody caressing the grim accoutrements and softening the flushed faces of the Cossacks as music never fails to do. The sadness of armour and cruelty of steel were bathed in the beauty of those enrapturing strains. At the head of this column of power they drove, Nathalie enchanted by the superb pride of the situation, until the *café Versailles* was reached on the *grande Allée*, where they were to be the General's guests at luncheon. Entering hastily, they passed directly out upon the balcony, there to stand at mimic salute, while the regiment with its haughty officers rode by, wrapped in that composure that always accompanies a sense of supreme power; the harmony of body and spirit complete.

When the diminuendo of their regular footfall sank beyond an echo, she gave a long sigh and turned to the General, both hands outstretched, crying——

"After this, life can only offer anti-climax!"

His gaze was fixed upon her, but not upon her face. Glancing down, she saw that Serge had removed his

sword, unobserved by her, and gently dropped it over her shoulders. His regiment had seen and understood. It was his dramatic personal coup contributed to the morning of triumphant happiness. They had thrilled to it, and stared in wonder at the being who could draw him from them. His honour was in her hands. It was for this girl, then, that their most brilliant officer would throw away his career and their blind devotion! Serge read their emotion with acute satisfaction. Ah! how little they knew him if they believed him capable of any other life! It belonged to him, as he belonged to it. Russia and his regiment was more intensely his since he was hers. She would never wish it otherwise. He would give her to his idolised country as the Infinite had given her to him.

The General was the first to speak. Drawing himself to the attitude of salute, he said with a smile of entire sincerity,

“Vive La Cossack Americanski!”

He kissed her hand with reverence, and that of Catherine, then turning to Serge, he kissed him on both cheeks in Russian style. Ah, Serge Ivanevitch—that is what I also should like to have done!” he exclaimed, “To be young, to be brave, to marry with an American! That is to live one’s dreams while waking!”

To which eloquence Nathalie responded by raising the sword and laying her lips against it, protesting softly, “If loving Russia and hating all her foes, or those who are false to her, can make me a good Cossack, I am already enlisted in your regiment.”

Serge, aflame inside, could not trust himself to look toward her. Ah no! he had not been mistaken in her! She was perfect, she was adorable! His heart was

beating as never before an attack, however desperate! He hurried away to order everything most extravagant in the way of extra wines in which to pledge the unspeakable joy of the hour.

CHAPTER VIII

A MILITARY EPISODE

THE uncles were coming. Their telegram in response to Nathalie's letter announcing her engagement had been simultaneous and immediate. She laughed at their tactics, when, after offering the escort of Hilary back to civilisation and discretion, they had decided to come themselves and fetch her. For it was not Sir James Blount alone, who, attended by Watson, was undertaking the journey to her rescue, but her father's brother John Mainwaring; who on arriving in London en route for India had missed his niece, his chief objective, and easily agreed to a détour by way of Russia; distances being to this habitual wanderer as sky to the birds. For John Mainwaring was as expansively a cosmopolitan as Sir James Blount was concentrated a provincial. They were the two extremes of aggressively open-minded American, always ready to pick up a new good thing—and the self-satisfied Briton, to whom whatever suited his ancestors was blest. Sir James' experience had been swaddled in tradition and limited to the average acquaintance of England, Scotland through his friend's houses, and a few compulsory Continental trips, which had but served to set him more firmly in his own grooves on his return to his home and habits. This undertaking, accordingly, impressed Nathalie as of considerable import. Plainly there were going to be fireworks. She trusted Uncle Jack to manipulate the situation to her satisfaction.

Meantime, Catherine allowed the lovers entire freedom. She was absorbed in her preparations and her nurses, or perhaps had a presentiment of coming evil and wanted them to enjoy as much as possible before their hour struck. She always drove with them in the brilliant Ujasdowska Allée; Serge sitting opposite, erect, resplendent, giving and receiving the military salute continuously as they met his superior officers or subordinate soldiers, never omitting the raised cap as they passed the cathedral or the cross. The park with its shaded drives would remain in her memory of those first June days in Varsovie, as would also the outdoor theatre, where they fed the carp, like careless children, happy in any form of diversion that kept them side by side. They breakfasted often in the Saxon gardens, after the early drilling was over, and dined in odd restaurants unknown to the American Consul but famous among Russians for epicurean kitchens, trying everything, from the café of the gorgeous Belmont to the tiny café de Kieff, noted for its bécasse, perdreaux and white wine from a special vintage of Odessa, ripened under the winds that sweep over the Black Sea to heighten the flavour of the grapes, and linger in their bouquet. They went often to the symphony concerts out under the open sky, where with the throbbing stars wondering above them, they heard the Russian orchestras play Tschaikowsky as if his tragic soul was re-incarnated in their passionate vibrations. Once Serge requested their own Rubinstein Night, but he did not again trifle with their sacred and half realised emotion. The longing aroused was too poignant, too intimate.

To Nathalie the city's bells were a daily delight. At home they had seemed to invite to the last judgment

with their harsh wrangling, but these copper bells from the distant Caucas sang a message sweet and fond, a diviner call to worship than any she remembered to have heard. She grew constantly more at ease with the human panorama about her; the defiant Poles never forgetful of their subjugation, the gallant officers, the typical mournful Jews, whose black beards swept below the waist line of their strange robes; the peasant girls smiling beneath the gay kerchiefs on their fair hair, full of grace, and light of step as of heart apparently as they brought in the crash on their shoulders; their bare white feet a vision of actual Trilbyism. The priests, the soldiers, the river, the summer camping where she saw the shrines as jealously guarded as the colours, and saw the soldiers dance and heard them sing—it was all becoming part of her life. With the ease which youth alone commands, she slipped each day further into the setting of her Cossack lover; increasingly further from England left so far behind.

When she wakened in the night she imagined the tread of sleepless sentinels, guarding her from whom? She began oddly to identify herself with the Russians in distinction from the Europeans or even the Americans who appeared and disappeared in the cafés. She even neglected to correct Serge, when he pronounced the wife of the American Consul “perfectly janitor’s wife”; and found the lady’s prattle of New York insipid, and her gushing admiration of the officers undignified. Her desire that strangers should receive a fair impression of the country astonished her as much as it rejoiced Serge. He adored his Russia, and so completely had she become identified with him, that he dominated her in unsuspected ways and fascinated her with the empire,

whose abuse she had heard on many ignorant or prejudiced lips. He took her to the shops where she saw rugs made by the wandering tribes of the Khirgis and Turkestan, whose gipsy blood seemed to have influenced design and stained the colours of their hand-work. They bargained for furs taken from all the prowling beasts of the romantic Asiatic wilds—the prey of the ever-hungry peasant. The lace no woman's heart might resist, and such linens! grown from the white flower of the flax only and woven on hand looms by patient fingers to the howling of wolves, while the snowbanks buried the poor villages, so many versts from the sleigh bells of Moscow or Petersburg! He brought her Ural stones taken from the streams by children and cut by the old people; combining them in barbarous splendours. Best of all she found the Cossack silver so suggestive of the reckless charm of the dare-devil Cossack and his legend, his signature on almost every piece from dagger to tea-spoon.

"Where do these peasants get their patterns?" Nathalie asked among the bewildering variety.

"From Nature," Serge told her, simply, "their colours from the wild flowers and the open sky above them."

"And the designs for their jewels?"

"From the constellations surely; also perhaps from the deep dreams of the Russian white night."

"But this lace, so exquisite, so priceless and rare?" She held up a piece almost too filmy to be real, as she spoke, "Where could a peasant get such a design?"

"That?—from the spider and from the shadows on the snow," he explained; "the Russian boundaries touch so many lands, she has taken something from all: China, India, Persia, Arabia, Turkey and Greece; all are her

neighbours, from whom she may learn any craft or the secrets of any art."

Gradually it ceased to seem strange to Nathalie to see all the world making the sign of the cross and saluting open church doors, even kissing the pavement before the shrines outside, and the relics within. God was accepted as a Father, greater even than the Tsar, by these poor children of His. In England she had seen men at weddings and certain church functions, of course, but she had never observed any religious fervour in those she met in her daily ride or nightly dance abroad. When they had other Russians with them, as host and in his own tongue, she judged Serge was a brilliant word-fencer. She could only watch his effective gestures and changing expression, not understanding his speech, but she saw others amused by his wit and appreciative of his repartee or listening as if spellbound to some narrative more or less imaginative. For, in spite of the limitations imposed by his inherited profession, Serge had seen much of the world. He had served in more than one desperate secret enterprise for Russia with no regiment at his back. He never boasted of his successes and was often so grave that when his flashing smile did break through, it was as if it had come upon him unsuspected, betrayed him against his better judgment after definite resistance. Much as she hated to lose his conversation, Nathalie never felt excluded by either story or laughter she did not understand, for Serge contrived to make her feel that he was with her in sympathy, and merely amusing their guests as became a host, while his soul sat apart with hers. Not yet had the subtle, evil hour come when she dreaded to know what it might mean to a woman, to be in ignorance of

her husband's native speech. The complications that might arise from such a cause troubled her as little now as the impending conflict with her uncles. The gravity of Serge, at first so oppressive, had become less of a bewilderment. "A smile is not an indiscretion!" she told him, but the shadow of the Slav perpetually brooded over him, beyond his consciousness, no doubt. To her it was but one more of his heartbreakingly unique charms. Dancing, riding or over the piano together, he preserved the solemn sweetness of a child. She often contrasted him with Hilary, roaring over some cheap joke in a comic newspaper, trafficking the stale or even vulgar *on dits* of his club windows, with a savoury relish. Arrayed before her, she saw in fancy the chattering, idle, smirking men of the London drawing rooms. She was bitterly unjust of course. But she was young and in love, and to those who "love much," surely their best friends have much to forgive—and forget!

Of the Cossacks and their origin she never tired of hearing. Serge taught her their part in the epic of Russia, of the glory of Ermak, banished to Siberia only to give it back as his guerdon. He talked fondly of the river Don, its vineyards far below in his beloved Caucas, the home of the Cossack. He described the Georgian road, and Kasbek, the watchman of the East, so familiar to him during his schooldays at Tiflis, the "little Paris" of the South. Pushkin and Lermontoff were always on his lips, though Byron was one of his gods also.

"You do not know your Byron! And yet he has your pride!" he exclaimed.

"We do not altogether admire him—his morals or his poetry," Nathalie once protested in self-defence.

"Then you are all asleep! Byron did all for poetry as for freedom."

"The author of Don Juan?" she began—

Serge smiled one of his rare smiles.

"Ah, you do not know your Byron," he said as if detecting her in an amusing ignorance. "You show it by considering his light loves only. You must come to Russia to know how to prize him, the great Liberator! The almost King of Greece!" She felt the justice of his rebuke. "With your own Edgar Allan Poe it is the same song," Serge lamented, when she stared at the monuments in Poe's honour and could not understand the Russian furor over him. Serge could quote him by the page, while she could only give a random line, indeed his ease with many literatures put her to the blush. Her respect for his acquirements mounted steadily. Even with her, he preserved the mystery of himself intact. Whether it was that of Russia, or his own personality, she was not yet quite sure. Sometimes they were long silent together, when he loved best to crouch at her feet on the dark balcony of the Bruhlowski and watch the stars in awe, interrupting his trance to tell her quaint legends he had taken from Bedouin lips in the desert; kissing her hands softly, and sighing from a heart too full of rapture to contain its burden, or murmuring in half whispers—"Ia lublu vas uz hazno bolshoi," in the unnerving Russian which came to be to her the language of the naked soul; deeper, holier, more intimate than any she had known. Indeed though his world called him brilliant—riding, dancing, singing, with a "*verve*" that brought the quick scarlet to her cheek like a lash, as she beheld him—in love he was, as yet, like a child overawed to find himself suddenly in a sacred place.

Their lyric was broken by an incident sufficiently commonplace to those about her, but proving his necessity to her, beyond all expectation. The regiment of which he was in command was ordered to a town not far off, to quell the persistently rising insubordination there. They were nothing more than recurrent freaks of scattered revolutionists, people calling "Constanzia," without knowing it to be the name of an empress long dead, or a constitution—in their greed for the free Vodka promised in reward by their paid instigators. But property was endangered and order jeopardised. It was time for the display, at least, of authority. To Nathalie it was the first hint of Russia as she had preconceived it. Until her own experience she had always had Cossacks represented to her as riding down innocent Jews or beheading martyr mobs of gentle revolutionists on their pikes. Wild stories of impending siege were flying about, under the breath of course; of shops about to be shut by the insurgents, and probable shortage of supplies. The frightened officials in the towns beyond the city had begged for assistance. Nathalie lay awake all night and was pale and nerveless before the trial of their first parting was upon her. On the contrary Serge, like any soldier disciplined to sleep even on the edge of real battle, was fresh for the fray at *réveillon*. He could not understand her distress over the incident. When he leaped from his horse with barely time to say farewell, obedient to military precision, blind to personal regret or possible danger, she knew as never before that her lover, this man who had seemed already part of herself, was first of all a soldier—a soldier who had killed and would kill again, an officer who would command his men to kill if occasion arose. She saw

that as he was glad to be called upon to serve, however unimportant the command. This orderly camp in a summer garrison town stood only for an episode in the limitless career of a nation and its wars. It was the soldier now who stiffly bent above her hand in the parting salute. Before others he was impassive as a statue. He looked as on that first morning, a stranger ruling the world from the back of his fiery mount. For a flash his glance penetrated her, sought her soul. Then as if his emotion threatened to make a coward of him, he was again the iron officer.

"Serge, you terrify me!" she cried. "You look avenging, implacable, superb!"

"The enemies of Russia are also the enemies of her soldiers," he said curtly, "at home or abroad."

"I believe you like it," she protested.

"I adore it! Not this dirty police duty, but real danger, adventure! We Cossacks are all absolutely the same, to our friends, devoted; to our foes, relentless!"

"They are not your enemies, they are your brothers! mistaken, misguided, ignorant victims of oppression! You will not arouse them to desperation? You will not let them hurt you?" A horror for his safety rushed over her. What if those lithe limbs were to be crippled? Or scars deface those idolised features?

"Me?" he asked with scornful composure, "Hurt me? Nyet, they will not hurt me, the dogs!"

"But you will not hurt them?" she begged, laying a white hand on his arm as if to hold him back. "They are such simple village children! I feel for them so! Some of those happy girls may be among them, those barefooted pretty things, with their twinkling white feet! Or those poor, white-faced, over-burdened, under-paid workmen.

Oh, Serge, don't hurt them! Don't!" She was almost in tears as he grew impatient to be off and do his work.

"We are not murderers," he said, smiling. "I have seen a Cossack pick up an infant holding it against the saddle with care, playing with it like a kitten, carrying it to the nearest station of the red-cross, for the Sisters to adopt; although the same Cossack would show no mercy to the father of the child" he added. "This affair to-day is nothing; a matter of no serious interest for us," he insisted lightly, anxious to be gone.

"Remember how powerless they are to defend themselves. It is cowardly to ride down in regiments. For my sake, Serge—! Ah! you hated me for wanting a field mouse killed!"

It was a weak conclusion, but she poured out her appeal heedless of climax. Her eyes were sweetly troubled, the look of pain in them increased their softness and her touch upon his arm became a grip of actual force. Her lips might be trembling but her face was determined, glowing with a great purpose to defend the poor peasants by her power over him.

"It is for the army to obey, not reason," he said hastily. "And you, Dushenka, will you keep yourself safe and content till my return? See, little Princess of dreams, already it is past the time set for my departure. It may be only for a day or two. The Saints be near you!"

Again kissing her hand he had gone, leaving her to the utter strangeness of life without him, and with a faint cloud of their first difference lying across the meaningless sunshine of the empty days.

Little or no news came to them from the events taking place near by. Every one was too racked by the news

from the front to care about a handful of insurgents at home. The War office grumbled that a division of a hundred would have been sufficient to send to Wyszogrod. The officials were old women to ask for a regiment! Nathalie, making bandages under the skilful supervision of a red cross nurse, had much time for reflection. Her eyes wandered about the walls of the great bare commissariat with a new idea of what might lie before her as a soldier's wife. Russia took her breath away on the start. Now she felt as if she had been holding her head under water to see how long she could do it without suffocating. Bereft of the excitement afforded by the presence of Serge, the true value of the scenes and conditions about her asserted itself. What would it be after her marriage, to find herself alone in Russia? To be isolated perhaps on some solitary estate waiting for the close of some protracted campaign, surrounded, it might well be, by servants whose tongue was incomprehensible to her, or waiting in some strange city like Moscow, with no one nearer than some unknown English Consul to give her advice or protection? It would not be possible to prevent such partings—she could not hope to be always with Serge. In his bearing this morning even there had been nothing of the gentle child or adoring lover. It had all vanished utterly. In its place stood the iron man of battle, the savage Cossack, whose Magyar blood was up!

"Pardon me, but you are not winding as closely as you should," said the voice of the nurse, in French, taking her bandage from her as she spoke and doing it over again. Small wonder the girl could not remember instructions with her mind off on devious paths that led to such unwelcome conclusions!

"I won't forget again," she promised eagerly, taking back her work with a sincere show of regret for her carelessness. "I can't help thinking of those poor peasants at Wyszogrod. Do you suppose they are very desperate?"

"Not so desperate but that the Cossacks will quiet them easily enough. They will terrorise them at the first sight of their lances," the nurse assured her contentedly.

"Why do they fear them so?" asked Nathalie, anxious to continue the conversation, hoping to hear some scrap of a report that had not reached her.

"The peasants rear their children in terror of the Cossacks," the nurse explained readily, without pausing a moment from the work of her deft fingers. "The Cossacks will get you! they say to little Peter Peter-evitch if he will not work, or to the baby sister even, if she cries and will not stop at their command."

"As our ignorant people tell children the bogey-man is coming after them, I suppose," said the girl absently. "But they won't fire on those poor people, will they?"

"That will be for the officer in command to decide," said the nurse.

Some one called her away just then and Nathalie continued at her occupation with a heavy heart. It was a glorious thing to be a Cossack on dress parade. It was startling to accept the other grim side of the medal with its ghastly probabilities. After three days had passed without news, even Catherine seemed preplexed, if not anxious. When she had learned, by accident merely, that the regiment had returned and Serge did not come to the Bruhlowski to report himself, she made direct inquiry of Krasemskin, without much satisfaction in his

replies. One of his brother officers spoke of having seen Serge at drill. Another said he was a little out of sorts. And with that they were obliged to be content. Catherine knew her brother well enough not to force him. If he chose to make a mystery of his behaviour she would humour him.

It was not until the evening of the fifth day, with Nathalie in a fever of unrest and loneliness, that Colonel Krasemskin admitted Serge to be under military arrest. The possibility of Serge wounded and unwilling to admit the humiliation or show himself to her in less than full regalia would have been a blow at her heart. Serge under arrest, however briefly, stabbed her pride for him and silenced her quick questioning. Catherine, with the implacable quality of a gentle nature thoroughly aroused, was adamant toward her brother. She would not ask a syllable concerning his disgrace or the nature of his fault. She would not admit that his affairs mattered to them. Nathalie had never seen a human being so transformed by a hint of dishonour in one she loved. She kept them all at work in the heat so uninterruptedly that the fond and tender nature of the woman seemed supplanted by a dogged spirit of generalship. "We have never seen Madame la Generale as now," the nurses would protest as order after order came to them without intermission or rest. Nathalie was included as one of them. She did not understand this redoubled ardour on the part of her wonderful Catherine, unless it was her form of atonement for her brother's offence, but she obeyed as a good soldier. This was army discipline. It tore Catherine's heart to read the suffering in the girl's eyes, but she only added to the duties she had imposed, as if intent on leaving her no time for tears or discon-

solate meditation. Nathalie could not make out whether she was in fear lest her brother had actually committed some unpardonable indiscretion or if her anger was kindled against any official who had dared to sentence him. It was a time of trial to them all.

What had actually occurred was very simple, too simple, it seemed to Serge, to require any discussion or protest. At the head of his regiment, mounted on their little Donsky horses, lance in hand, Serge had ridden in among the desperate groups of sullen peasants, prepared to disperse them by the sight of the dreaded military as usual. Many of them were armed only with stones picked up in the streets as the thud of marching Cossack horse was heard approaching. Little real harm had as yet been done; a few windows broken, a little superficial bloodshed, nothing really serious except for the attitude of the gathering mob. Suddenly a man, who had pressed forward to use his knife on a Cossack horseman, was stunned by a blow from the back of a lance and lay senseless in the street. Instantly his daughter, a bold-faced girl, large and blonde, aimed a stone with precision and hit the Colonel of the regiment a ringing blow in the face. It was only a peasant stone aimed in scorn and defiance of the imperial troops, but it set the Cossack blood aflame. The Commander-in-Chief of the military district, who had ordered the troops for protection, gave the command to fire.

Halt!"

It was Serge who gave the order. They halted as one man.

It was his duty as commander of the regiment to repeat the order.

"Fire!" All eyes were upon him, awaiting his sharp

signal. All beheld the blood streaming from the gash upon his cheek. An instant he hesitated. The girl had sprung to her feet directly before him. He saw she held an infant in her arms. Her eyes were those of a hunted animal at bay. The glance she threw at him was hatred and a feminine admiration mixed, beyond her own control or comprehension. Her dress was torn at the neck, revealing the whiteness of her skin below the tan; he noted her beauty with amazement. Had he been dazed by the sharpness of the blow? His men were alert as animals to spring on these dogs of peasants who dare lay an outrage upon their Colonel.

Only an instant his decision wavered. After all, she was a woman. Nathalie would in time be a woman, who might have to ask mercy of others for her child, his own child! She was so near him that death must be instant if he obeyed the revengeful order of the hasty command. He did not repeat it. He aimed with a hand of steel—he, the dead shot of the regiment. The men nearest recognised the action. It was his right to avenge the insult if he chose. Let him shoot her down as she deserved, if he would. They quivered as his hand drew the trigger—then he fired deliberately in the air. There was no time to save the woman, however, for at the same instant a shot from another hand brought her to earth as some idle wild bird taken on the wing. In the confusion that followed his insubordination passed unrebuked. It was not until the crowd had been dispersed and military order restored that he was sent for to report himself and declared under arrest for disregarding a command. He made no defence. Indeed, what defence was there to make? His sentence was the lightest possible under circumstances technically so grave. It was a merited dis-

grace. He would not protest. He scorned to explain. What did it matter? It kept him from Nathalie, which alone he cursed over in private to the confusion of all his saints.

"What came over you, Serge Ivanevitch?" his General asked at the end of his enforced confinement to barracks. "You had some reason for this freak of yours? Yours is not an empty head; are you going to tell me what this spirit of insurrection means? If you refused to fire or repeat the command, you had your own reasons. I want to hear them. The Governor-General informs me that conditions were becoming unendurable. Government property was threatened, Government offices were attacked. If the peasants see such a contemptuous insult to His Majesty's troops go unavenged I ask you to consider the result." Still Serge remained silent. "I am asking you for your reason," the General said patiently.

"May I remind your Excellency that an officer has no right to have reasons of his own?" Serge asked with perfect deference.

"But this confinement is humiliating. I should have been glad to spare you, and if your reasons had been good ones a pretext could have been found, if you had not refused to explain your conduct to me."

"The punishment is not heavy for me. It was deserved. I do not cry out about it," insisted Serge. The General was still unsatisfied.

"Krapernitz, who happened to be near you, said your hand trembled," he suggested.

"It is a lie," said Serge politely.

"If you were ill you should not have let me find you in ignorance," his superior insisted kindly.

"I was not ill."

"You are visionary, Serge Ivanevitch, and too much of an idealist sometimes. If you have any socialistic ideas in your head stop it at once."

"I am not in the least a socialist," he contradicted, as if mentally he crossed himself for such an aspersion.

The General waited, but no word was forthcoming.

"I regret that you would not let me defend you," he said with a lowered voice. "I would so gladly have undertaken it for your sister's sake as well as your own. You will not reconsider and let me put you right with the world in this matter?"

"No, thank you," persisted Serge. A long silence ensued, Serge standing, waiting still for his permission to withdraw; the General scowling hard over his lack of success in gaining the confidence of his junior officer.

"You are not lacking in loyalty at heart to the imperial cause?" he asked at length, raising his eyes to the inevitable picture of the Tsar that hung above his head. Serge smiled in assurance and contempt of the insinuation.

"Then what can possibly have been your reason?"

"It is so simple, so indefensible, your Excellency, that I am ashamed to have to give it, or refuse to give it. I prefer to take my sentence. It leaves me without obligation to any soul—free after my crime."

"But you do not deserve to be made a by-word of the regiment."

"Your Excellency is too kind," with a graceful inclination. "I bear my sentence without a murmur. May I be allowed now to retire?"

And bear it he did, until, free and handsome and gloriously shining, he appeared at the Bruhlowski as if nothing had occurred in the interval between that hot noon-

tide and the one so many days before when he had ridden away. To Nathalie he would have offered no explanation had not the sight of her white face, without a word escaping her of reproach or inquiry, smitten him with remorse for all she had suffered.

"You did it for my sake, darling; I was sure of it," she cried triumphantly when he had excused his prolonged absence with a light version of the real story.

"I could not fire on a woman. It was nothing," he repeated when she lavished her love and praise upon him for his action.

"Catherine, come and welcome the hero," Nathalie called, but Catherine came slowly and was not so easily pacified.

"I am not very proud of you, little brother," she said. "Who made you the judge of Russia's enemies or their protector? How long is it since you refused to fire upon her foes?"

"Her foes, yes. Against her own people, no!" he replied, without anger.

"The foes of the government," she retorted unassuaged.

"Ah, yes, there is the real tragedy. Why should the government be obliged to send us to ride down the peasants? Is it their fault? Ah, Catherine mine, be patient with me. If one is a man and one loves a woman, how can he fire into the defenceless breast of a woman with her child in her arms?"

Catherine turned very pale. It was to Nathalie she spoke, not Serge, as she said firmly:

"You have spoiled a brilliant officer."

"Love has many dues to pay the army, and the army to love as well," Serge reminded her persuasively.

"These creatures of the mob are not women, they are revolutionists! The menace of our empire!" said Catherine coldly, then turning to Nathalie without a sign of relenting, "Serge is likely to get into more serious scandal over this. The Cossack is a soldier, not a lover."

"The Cossack is a soldier, not a dirty police force!" inserted Serge proudly.

"The Cossack is the pride of his empire. He does not flinch before his duty!"

"Ah, well, it is over; may I have some luncheon with you?" begged Serge with entire transformation of manner.

"It has just begun!" thought Catherine, but her hands were already upon his shoulders and she kissed him as if he had been playing some boyish prank of his school-days. After all, she should always forgive and love him. She always had forgiven and loved.

When in due time the truth reached the General through her prudent lips, he bit his long cigar spitefully in two.

"If it only means what you say it does, and nothing more, Catherine Ivanovna," he replied, "very good. If it does not mean the effect of that drivelling old inspired socialist at Yasna Polovnia, with his tracts and barefooted insolence."

"It is love," said Catherine convincingly. "That is all. He is for the first time subdued to his soul's profoundest depths. Forgive him! He is really very innocent. He could not act differently. You know his nature. He does one thing at a time as if nothing else existed. Now he is in love. The turn of the army will come again."

"A man may make a fool of himself about a woman,

and lose his head—admitted,” said the General with a significant glance toward her which made Catherine shrink. “But Tolstoism would be the ruin of the army if it once got hold of these young fellows. Insurrection would be the Russian bear let loose, where revolution is only a runaway pig. If it ends here—” he mused thoughtfully, without taking his eyes from her face. “If we do not encounter each other again, this spirit of Tolstoism and I!”

“It is love only,” Catherine assured him.

“And to that plea from the lips of Catherina Ivanovna, I am the last to oppose an argument.”

She was annoyed to read his application to herself in the sentence she had been so eager to have considered as merely a general statement.

“Serge is a genius also. We must make allowance for that,” she urged to divert him from the trend of his personalities.

“And genius, as we know, is too often the passport to Siberia. I do not like this omen.” He shook his head and his deep-set eyes read in her own the confirmation of his fears. “Any love is good, but for a Russian, Russian love is best,” he said at last. “If she takes Serge from the army she will regret it. For a soldier’s career is dear always, when the marriage candles have burned out. And to the Russian any other life allegiance is, in the end, serfdom.”

CHAPTER IX

THE UNCLES' INVASION

ON THE arrival of the uncles Nathalie instantly assumed the defensive. They mounted the turning stairway of the Bruhlowski on the evening of their first day with the expression of pioneers scouting a hostile ridge. They had settled themselves at the gorgeous Hotel Bristol, on the Nevski Allée, previous to their reconnoitre. "For reasons of comfort, don't you know," according to Uncle James.

"To be right in the thick of things and for local colour," according to Uncle Jack. But, as Nathalie shrewdly suspected, really for a reason not given—to be on neutral ground. Her uncle Sir James Blount brought the solid reasonableness of England aggressively and oppressively close. Her father's American brother, Jack Mainwaring, on the contrary, enveloped her at once in a free and easy atmosphere, sweet, jovial and sympathetic. He was of her own race and blood. She counted on him to understand her better than Sir James, although he knew her less, felt that he could be looked toward in an emergency, even relied upon for moral support. Uncle James had pecked at her with lips over-redolent of "Scotch" and cigar smoke in token of his pleasure at seeing her again. Uncle Jack, having hugged her warmly, had stood with his arm thrown round her while he was being duly presented to Catherine. He was a man of less than sixty, spare, and well tanned by many angles of the sun on its round. Smooth shaven, with an

incisive mouth, he looked his perfect health. His hair was untouched with grey, his eyes were keen and merry. There was a twinkle in them that bespoke a sense of humour as he began at once to tease his niece with his first impression of her adopted country.

"How astonishingly you thrive for the only bit of idealism set out among the raw material of realism," he cried. "Right in the midst of such stuff as Tolstoi and Verestchagen are made of on every side! Child, how blooming you look! Your Cossack has not suppressed you at the point of the bayonet yet. That is evident."

Catherine, serenely unconscious of his nonsense, was offering the Englishman tea, assisting him to the exact number of lumps of sugar, and pouring to the precise colour of cream to which his habits inclined.

"O Uncle Jack, don't begin being funny until you have got something to go by," protested Nathalie, glancing hastily at the others to see if he had been overheard.

"No marks of the knout on you visible to the naked eye! That will be a relief to your British relation, as far as it goes," he declared, kissing her again.

"Hush!" said Nathalie, laying a deterring finger across his lips. "Hush! You are dreadfully ignorant. I used to be myself. Don't display it until you see for yourself just how ridiculous it makes you. It really makes us appear idiotic. To think of the Cossack as a lower order of being is to commit a social blunder."

"Is it so?" with lifted eyebrows, not unworthy of Hilary. "Are they educated at all?"

"In precisely the same schools and universities as the other officers."

Uncle Jack remained sceptical. "Can your Cossack talk anything anybody can understand?" he asked, partly

to enjoy her revolt against such a density on his part and partly to prepare her for the attitude of Sir James, which was seriously that of supposing the worst.

"Serge speaks more languages than I ever knew existed," she said enthusiastically.

"The Russians do," admitted Uncle Jack. "But tell me, does he domesticate easily? We always think of him as riding down revolutionists who refuse to be taxed for the follies of the Grand Dukes."

"I was just like you once. It is not hopeless. You will forget all that nonsense. Have some tea, dear, do—" urged Nathalie, observing that Catherine was now overhearing and that Sir James looked alarmingly ready to enter the arena. It was too soon for any opening of argument or pursuance of discussion. There were perceptibly undercurrents of race prejudice liable to overflow and deluge convention. The mere recognition of it outraged all sense of decent propriety. Nathalie could not trust her relations to gauge properly the enormity of their impulse. If they disgraced her in Catherine's hospitable eyes on their very first appearance as her guests, it should be done over her determined effort to the contrary. Gathered about the samovar, with the perfectly appointed tea table at hand and the butler in European evening dress hovering over them, it might have been any sitting room in England as far as it was distinguished outwardly by any mark of savagery. Sir James set down his empty cup, that had been twice refilled, with a sigh of satisfaction, if not surprise.

"That is refreshing," he said approvingly; "the English know a good quality of tea wherever it is to be found. I never drank better outside her own colonies. It is the one thing to be got in India even, by insisting upon it,

you understand, madam, by insisting upon it! If one has not burned all the taste out of one's mouth by their infernal curry, that is."

"I knew you could appreciate our tea," said Nathalie archly. "After you have eaten one Russian dinner you will be prepared to swear to anything."

"Quite like home here, the tea and all, eh?" What did the minx mean by "our tea" or by twitting him on his appetite? He decided to let it pass for to-night. No sense in getting her blood up until the real object of difference was at stake. Then "a firm hand, a firm hand," he repeated to himself, "and a steady curb until this shying at Hilary's shadow is put out of her head." It was Uncle Jack's turn now.

"Homey little country, this of yours, Madame Melyukof," he began, "there was room for all the cities of the Union set in an endless chain between that frontier town and your city. What is the exact population of Russia by the last census, if you happen to remember?"

"There are a hundred million peasants alone," Nathalie broke in, counting on the dramatic effect of statistics upon the American mind.

"No wonder they raise—" he was about to add a word rather too vivid for society, even in Russia, seeing which Sir James, as the apostle of effete civilisation, remarked blandly, "None of the enormous difficulties of scattered colonisation here, such as Great Britain has to contend with, don't you know. All in a bunch, so to speak, within easy reach of the supreme powers."

Jack Mainwaring jumped to his feet and walked to the window, but it was too dark to see anything more than a huddled mass of shadow in the gardens opposite.

"Lord, what a country!" he ejaculated. "And he calls

it all within reach! That is the true born Briton for you. Why, it is bounded on the north by the Pole, on the west by such shrieks for freedom as Hungary and Turkey! On the east by those seas that were only good to confound a spelling bee when I was a boy—Okhotsk and Kamchatka! And on the south by the day of judgment, I guess."

"But all under one rule, you know," insisted Sir James. "Monarchy with a firm hand and short curb is all that is needed. England has had to prove it in every quarter of the globe."

Uncle Jack remained on his feet.

"Well, to domesticate the torrid and frigid zone under one tent seems to me more of a problem than letting the animals out of their cages at the circus to see what will happen. It would take America to straighten them all out. No other government could ever do it alive. It does seem odd to be visiting right among them all, on equal terms, so to speak."

The quiet entrance of Serge produced a double effect. The natural phlegm of the Englishman remained undisturbed. Uncle James said, "How do you do," with the same degree of warmth as had they met often in the park and parted an hour before at their mutual club in Piccadilly. Uncle Jack, on the contrary, studied him openly, but with kindly, serious eyes. Uncle James effaced him as hardly meriting the consideration due to some unusually picturesque feature added to the landscape of foreign travel. He had once regarded in much the same manner an Oriental prince with a nose ring to whom he had suffered introduction in India. No scenery or outlandish peculiarity could impress an Englishman as of any value beyond a moment's comparison with the supe-

riority of his own country in the corresponding respect. But the warm-hearted American saw beneath this unfamiliar exterior, which might prove to be a smouldering volcano or an adjacent iceberg, the man his dead brother's only child loved best in all the world.

"What do you speak, sir?" he demanded in a loud, clear tone, much as he would have demanded "what will you take?" had they met in his native California, and extending his hand as he spoke.

"French, German, Arabic, Polish, English—what you prefer," replied Serge, taking the proffered hand without warmth.

Uncle Jack laughed aloud. "Those ought to hold out during our stay. We will begin in English, then, if you don't mind, and use that while it lasts. That is my long suit." Serge smiled as one might smile to indulge a child who thinks to have acquitted himself with credit. He felt the intentional encouragement extended to him. It amused him far more deeply than the idea itself.

"This is most interesting," chimed in Sir James. "I had no least idea the Cossack spoke the regular Russian. What other rights has he in common with regular Russians?"

"Absolutely the same," said Serge; the topic might have been concerning the negro for all colour it took from his treatment. "And after," he amplified, with a sly smile at Nathalie, "the Cossack has also two hands, two feet, two eyes, exactly as all men."

After the first inevitable restraint cast by mutual self-consciousness, Serge was charming in spite of himself. He made no effort to please, but his unconsciousness was the real unconsciousness of a foreigner, so unlike the forced unconsciousness of the Englishman abroad, by

which he surrounds himself in enviable isolation, impenetrable by the less privileged classes born beyond the channel wave. Soon they were chatting as men of the world on general topics. It might easily have become a bragging match but for the presence of the ladies. The attitude of Sir James was one of tolerance only for all countries not under the jurisdiction of the House of Lords. Jack Mainwaring hurled in the disconcerting, overwhelming greatness of America and her resources with an appalling accuracy of figures to the fraction in support of his statements, while the Russian, too courteous to assert, but too true a patriot to permit disadvantageous comparison, haughtily corrected wild misstatement from time to time with a gracious softness of manner contrasting, to his advantage, with the stolidity of Sir James in the wrong and the excitement of Jack Mainwaring to prove himself in the right. The manner of Serge toward Nathalie was coldly correct, as that of a country bound by treaty, toward an independent empire in revolt. She puzzled over it all the evening. Had she possibly offended him? It was not her fault that this warm, alluring evening was being wasted in stupid indoor comparison of a republic, an empire and a monarchy. She did not care who ruled the nation as long as love swayed the world. Was it that he accepted with wounded pride the significance of the little drama being played out for his benefit to convince him of the distance between him and the girl he had won? She abated not one whit in her manifest devotion to him, only to be repulsed by his absence of response. Ah, Nathalie, you have much to learn of the hauteur of generations of Cossack ancestry, of Oriental legend, of pride fierce and untamable!

Back in their hotel together the uncles relapsed into a smoky silence over a bottle of Scotch, unearthed by Watson from their own luggage.

"Try a Havana," suggested Jack Mainwaring.

"Prefer my pipe—know what I am smoking there," said Sir James.

After a silence of some minutes the American spoke again. "He is well set up, this youngster of Nathalie's. Surprising looking chap."

"He does not grunt. He speaks some sort of language. That is something," admitted Sir James grudgingly. "Not that it makes any difference what he does," he concluded.

"He does more. He speaks our own language," assented the other heartily. "He even gets the letter t without calling it ze or de."

"One fancied him half tame," contributed Sir James to the conversation.

"That in itself ought to make an appeal to the imagination of a fighting Englishman," encouraged the American. "I had as lief a girl of mine married him as one of those fool Frenchmen."

"One dislikes all foreigners, and all that sort of thing, in the family. Every decent Englishman is the same there, I fancy," said Sir James. "They are all the same cut until his Majesty's troops lick them into place."

Again there fell a long silence and again Jack Mainwaring asked bluntly, "What is your objection to him personally?"

Sir James stared at him as if making due allowance for the tribal limitations of a North American Indian.

"I will explain," he said patiently. "To have the son of a wandering tribe of darkest Asia propose himself as

a member of my family—" He stopped and the blood rushed purple to his eyes and threatened to burst through; the inflamed veins swelled with anger as he brought his fist down upon the table to emphasise his opinion. "Why it looks so! It's such horrid form, Mainwaring! Dam'me, if it isn't!"

The next day no one opened fire. Sir James had gout as a result of the supernaturally rich table of the Bristol, and kept to his room or the flower-scented crimson writing room of the hotel. Uncle Jack, in Nathalie's wake, went sight-seeing, enjoying it immensely and picking up all sorts of enlightenment, duly rehearsed to his brother-in-law at night, to be by him scorned as unimportant beside his own self-manufactured facts and established theories.

"Russia is run by the uniformed man," he announced, as one of the first results of his own observation. "Every man is a hero—in uniform!"

Sir James was sufficiently recovered to be dining with Catherine and the dinner had passed off without earthquakes. Serge, always respectful, though deeply resenting the intrusion of the uncles, had stepped to the door to give an order to his tall soldier, as Uncle Jack asked Nathalie jocosely:

"Don't you ever feel as if your young man was a policeman, in all those gold buttons? It astonishes me how he manages his skates in the parlour, too!" he sighed, looking down at the long silver spurs. "I should break my neck over them, off a horse. Don't you get tired of this continuous masquerade effect?"

"I have not as yet," she confessed, with a warning frown. She bore herself gallantly, but she knew the struggle was coming nearer, and was nerving herself

hourly to meet it. To-night, thus far, antagonisms had been skilfully avoided. They were talking with Catherine of the Greek church, and she was interpreting her own country to them by virtue of her knowledge of their own. The well-fed priests had much impressed Uncle Jack.

"They seem to lay all their work off on the Saints," he remarked, as a result of his casual observation. "The images of the Saints perform the miracles and the holy water antidotes the plague, the evil eye, and keeps the cattle in the field from being struck by lightning. The Saints do the work of an insurance company at home in my country, preserve the house from burning up. The position of Saint is hard worked and under-paid. I wonder they don't strike, or form a labour union and make the priests divide up the hours."

"All the priests do is to take their fees and pronounce the conscience of the sinner free from any crime, however heinous," said Sir James, with a view to enlightening Nathalie as to the rottenness of all faith save that prescribed in the prayer book of the established Church of England. Catherine pleaded for the clergy, saying, "Some of the priests are inferior and uneducated, but though there is always much superstition to degrade, there is wonderful consecration among them, especially in the monasteries."

"Russia can boast some of the richest monasteries in the world, I am told," was Uncle Jack's quick rejoinder. He loved a woman to have religiousness. He loved a low, sweet voice in a woman, too—this friend of Nathalie's had both. She was appreciative of his intervention now, as she followed his line of thought, away from the heated point.

"Those in Moldavia and Wallachia both, yes. Those escaped the ravages of the Turkish armies. The true Muscovite of the Slavonic race has many virtues, but he is a great fanatic," she sighed.

"Do you approve the monastic life yourself?" Catherine paled, but before she could reply, Sir James had snatched the gauntlet and was hurling it in mid-air.

"The influence of their priests and the fanaticism of their people is all in line. There is no faith that tends so to debase the intellect and make man a slave." Sir James's intolerance of fanaticism was based upon a comfortable indifference to all religions. Catherine remained unmoved by this arraignment of all she held most sacred. The honours of courtesy were with these so-called savages again! She took up the conversation with that passive patience of the Russians, that is the wonder of all who behold it.

"We feel," she ventured gently, "that the orthodox Russian Church is right. That the Russian creed is the only correct form of Christianity and will eventually merge all else in itself; then universal peace will triumph over all disorder and confusion."

Sir James let her go on. He liked women to be talkative and make an effort to entertain him. The theme was heavy, to be sure, but this Catherine Melyukof was a handsome woman still. One could not call her "well preserved" yet, she had not deserved that bitter encomium of passing attraction. Her eyes were bright, and her hair too abundant to prate of lost youth for a number of years to come. She was on the right side of life still, he judged. Stupid of her not to count up her advantages and use them! She could wind this Mainwar-

ing round her finger, if she chose. The strawberries were ripe and the brand of champagne the best, his chair was luxurious and he had dined well. So he sat and catalogued her charms contentedly, quite inclined to bestow them on his brother-in-law, not listening to what she was saying particularly, until after some statement of the American, he noted her reply.

"Now that the Russian Church has passed the zenith of temporal power, and Anglican Protestantism is sterile, the next great religious revival may emanate from the Eastern Church. The despairing poor of Anglo-Saxondom may see in orthodoxy, so I am told by those who know best, an aspect of religion, new but supremely acceptable."

Sir James set down his glass in a perfectly straight line with his strawberry plate. What was this pretty little woman daring to say? He could not believe his ears. Before he could crush such fanaticism at one blow, she had added with an uplifted glow upon her face, as if already foreseeing the event, "If it should be Russian orthodoxy that triumphs, Russia will become the world power!"

"Nonsense!" thundered Sir James. "You don't know what you are talking about! Women seldom do, my dear mis-informed lady, except about their own petty affairs."

"Wait till you find yourself among the conquered!" taunted Nathalie. "You may live to confess that women are not automata. You may live to regret it!"

"Weak nations are proverbially cruel in conquest," said Sir James with an ill-natured attempt at epigram.

"Serge knows all about conquest. What loot did you take, after you got through the wall at Pekin?" she

asked, turning to him to avert another social disaster, as she saw the colour rising in Sir James' face.

"Only some champagne and a few small kisses!" he replied unhesitatingly, and for the first time the Englishman approved of him.

"It was just the right touch, dam'me if it wasn't! Saved a nasty situation and kept me from losing my temper," he said, with self-congratulation for his escape, to Jack Mainwaring as they smoked their last smoke before retiring.

"Bad for me to lose my temper, Egad! Nothing worse for the constitution, and likely to bring on acute indigestion. What an ass you were, Mainwaring, to touch a woman up on her creed! Have you never heard that if you scratch a Russian you will find a Tartar? Of course she would show fight. They all will, whether they mean it or not."

The other uncle deliberated. Sir James felt that he might be going to open the critical subject they had come out to determine, and showed his impatience by thumbing his Scotch glass, round and round.

"I have changed my mind about a good many things since I have been here," admitted his brother-in-law. "In fact I have moderated several degrees. But I don't on the whole, so much take to the idea of Nathalie marrying into a country where a book club and circulating library are refused by imperial order, and a *creche* for workingwomen's babies is commanded to desist from harbouring an illegal assembly of infants! I confess it is not the liberal interpretation of law she has been accustomed to."

"Why the deuce did I ever allow her to come out here?" demanded Sir James. "Curse me freely, Main-

waring, I deserve it! The English Consul is the only man in the place one can speak to, or hear speak, without losing one's temper. And that is the worst possible thing for me," he added aggrieved. "Every physician I have ever employed regularly, or had in on occasions, has been of the same opinion. Whatever their diagnosis, they all agree on that. They insist on my remaining calm, perfectly calm. If Nathalie wants to kill me, she is having her way! I tell you, Mainwaring, I won't stand this any longer! She has got to come to her senses."

"If we don't notice her, she will come around. Women always do, don't they? You are a married man. You know more about them than I do."

"I know more than I wish I did," grumbled Sir James; "I know enough to know that the only thing one is sure they won't do, is the very thing they will; and if one is solid on that, they won't do that either!"

"It is infatuation," said Mainwaring, "and that is like any freak of nature, not to be argued out of its run. She is intoxicated with the glitter of the country; dazzled by it, and Serge is not the chap to let the grass grow under his feet with a handsome girl like Nathalie. I don't altogether blame him for it either. It is natural."

They sat on disconsolately in the crimson glory of the smoking-room, long after even the late world that usually frequented it had gone to bed. The parterres of hyacinths and potted ferns were lost on their mood of dissatisfaction.

"Humph! It is Tartar madness!" cried Sir James at last, thinking of his own lounging chair in the library at home: a twinge of gout reminding unpleasantly of the miles of tormenting, jiggling distance that lay between.

"Oh, Nathalie is no fool!" contradicted her Uncle Jack, with a suspicion of a connection in his own thought, in excuse for what sounded irrelevant to his listener.

"One would wish to save her from making that exhibition of herself in public, if possible."

"I hope she will appreciate your efforts in her behalf; she may and then again she may not."

"I have risked my life to save her!" broke from Sir James, with such conviction that it savoured of eloquence.

"To save her for Hilary?" queried his brother-in-law, unimpressed.

"Women are all fools!" sputtered Sir James.

"When they are in love the first time, I suppose they are. And all men want them to be. We would not let them off with anything less," he assented.

"Not always! Nathalie's aunt was no fool! She did as she was bid and married as Providence elected."

"My sister was not in Nathalie's position. It is hard work supplanting a soldier in the heart of a woman, especially if he is a brave and handsome one, like this Serge Ivanevitch!"

"Don't ring the changes on that outlandish name of his!" retorted Sir James. "Whenever one hears it, it sounds like nothing but the short for Arabian Nights!"

"I am sure Nathalie considers it so," agreed Jack Mainwaring complacently.

"As to Lady Janet," cried her spouse, with a marked emphasis on the title, intended to remove her from American democracies of feeling, "what you say is balderdash! She threw over some nonsense or other about a non-commissioned officer to become Lady Blount. If you have forgotten the fact, I will recall it to you now,

and furthermore, ask you what would have become of her, with her nerves, I should like to know, if she had not? She would have been in her grave, or eaten up by cannibals long before now, dam'me if she wouldn't! One does hate sentiment! I am surprised to find you disagree with me there. It's the deuce with the comforts of life, and it's hell on the temper and digestion! It breeds gout in the long run as surely as too much Burgundy, in my veins, and no temporary satisfaction to pay for the pain!"

And so they went to bed, not quite sure how they stood toward each other: Sir James to dread the waking, with its miseries resultant from gastronomical indiscretions, and Jack Mainwaring to dream of Catherine, as he had dreamed of no woman for half a lifetime.

CHAPTER X

UNDER FIRE

IT WOULD have been Uncle Jack's way to constrain Nathalie without appeal or command, giving her determination time to cool or harden as closer intimacy with Russia and her Cossack seemed to warrant; but Uncle James, after an unusually reckless indulgence in forbidden wines and highly spiced meats, without the antidote of a jog on the grey Lady Jane to counteract the effect, sent peremptorily for his niece. It was the mood and manner in which he had been accustomed to send for Hilary in his school days, to instruct or reprimand.

She had expected the summons and came readily enough, unattended. She was much stared at and commented upon as she proceeded to the sitting-room reserved for the English Mi'Lord on the second floor. The officers hanging about the corridors followed her with rashly admiring eyes. "Amerikanski," she heard all about her as she passed. If their glance was bolder than respectful, remember that Russian ladies do not invade hotel corridors alone, even in the early morning. Watson, her Uncle James' man, conducted her upstairs, apologising under his breath all the way for their being in Russia at all, as if he considered such a fall from the pinnacle of London life, in some unaccountable way, his own fault.

"H't seems so much further off from 'ome than

h'Australia," he explained, "and impossible to get a roast of beef plain, h'or rare, for 'is Lordship! Not that I complain for myself, Miss. I remarked to Wallingford, when I first 'eard of this plan, Miss, 'is Lordship don't go off to that 'eathen land without 'is 'ome comforts, while Watson is young enough to travel. H'Africa, I am at 'ome in, and India, as you may say—'aving been valet to Sir 'Enry 'Azlett during 'is trips through the h'interior—and whatever 'ardships 'is Lordship is bound to meet, I know my duty and I keep my place."

Nathalie found her uncle sitting by a table, with his writing materials spread ostentatiously before him. A syphon of Seltzer was at his elbow, one foot straight out across a chair. He apologised for not rising, and for the informality of his position.

"Beastly attack," he grumbled; "only a besotted old uncle would have gone off on a wild goose chase like this, even to please so pretty a girl as you are, my dear Nathalie." He began facetiously enough, but failed to keep it up as he remembered his wrongs with a sudden streak of pain through his afflicted foot. "Are n't you ashamed of yourself, to exile a Britisher to such an outlandish resort?" he asked frowning. "It is beastly lonely for Watson, too—not that he complains, of course—" Nathalie gave him an arch glance of sympathy.

"He may not in words, Uncle James, but he is a cypress tree in appearance. I don't wonder he depresses you!"

"I should never allow a servant to depress me!" affirmed Sir James. "There is nothing but an attack of gout that depresses me!"

"The Russian kitchen is marvellous. I knew you would adore it. I only wonder you are alive after four days of beef Strogoff and their decoctions of mushrooms and cheese—to say nothing of Kuhlaba and 'officer's punch.' It shows a remarkable constitution that you have survived!"

"I am nearly enough by way of being dead! I can't stand any more of it—all this sort of thing, you know." He groaned, in spite of his effort not to show her that he was really suffering, and then asked abruptly:

"When shall I tell your aunt to expect us?"

"Were you writing to Aunt Janet?" she asked, with only casual interest. "Give her my love, won't you, Uncle James?"

"And Hilary? He would think a bit of that element rather his due, one might fancy!"

"Unfortunately I have none to send him," said Nathalie gravely; "none for him or any other man but Serge."

Her uncle caught at the opening she thus gave him, with eagerness. He had dreaded perhaps to open the encounter. The American blood in his wife's niece was always upsetting his calculations, and often his carefully cherished temper. If Nathalie were only English, one would know, so to speak, what to expect.

"What is it you object to in Hilary?" he asked argumentatively. "I have never been able to understand. He is a gentleman and all that sort of thing, don't you know? Kind to women, understands their tricks, eh?"

"It is not that I object to him," she replied quickly; "if I objected to him with any sort of strength of feeling it might convert me into caring for him."

"Then if you have no objection to him——"

"My having none is just the objection itself; the ob-

jection, that remains, of my being entirely unmoved by him one way or another."

"The dignity of an English nobleman is not consistent with spectacular display!" he said curtly. "There is a vulgarity about emotional natures, quite removed from the ideals of an English aristocrat, you are bound to admit."

"I never saw human nature combine the two qualities of dignity and spirit as they are illustrated in Serge," she said reflectively. "Dignity, force and grace are personified in him."

"You are a girl of some spirit yourself," said Sir James moderately, "but your will is unfortunately stronger than your brain, which can't be trusted to carry out the impulses of your heart. One sees one must be prepared to do that for you. Accordingly I have written your aunt to expect us this day week. We leave to-morrow night, resting over in Berlin. Gore is having a party on the week-end following. I promised him to fetch you back in time to drive down with him on his coach. He has been very civil about asking for you. It does not seem to have made any difference to him that you have proved yourself a bit flighty. Some men would be shy of an erratic woman. Gore is of a liberal extraction; only thing against him in my mind."

If he thought he had finished the matter, he had counted prematurely on his victory, as if his flags had been raised on the distant view of a fortress.

"Make your plans without reference to me, please, Uncle James. I am not leaving with you to-morrow," she announced, attempting to speak naturally.

"Gammon! Of course you are leaving with us. Nothing else is to be thought of for one instant!"

Nathalie's chin lifted at once. The angle became defiant without losing its charm.

"No one can coerce me or oblige me to go back, if I do not want to. You cannot go yourself this week, anyway."

"You take me for an invalid, do you? I will soon set your mind at rest as to that!"

She arrested his evident intention to rise with a warning hand. "Don't move, Uncle James; I know it almost cuts you in two"—this slyly interposed. "I meant only to refer to the difficulty about your passport."

"What difficulty about my passport? Nothing the matter with that I fancy!" He derided the idea stoutly.

"Oh no, nothing in the least bit the matter with it," she said soothingly, "but the forms require three days. The police have it in their hands, you know—they have to be notified, and——"

"Watson attends to all that," he interrupted; "that is what he is for. He will get it when I tell him to. I have already ordered him to, in fact."

"He won't be able to obey you. Not for three days ordinarily, and Sunday comes in, and there is a fête day that will not count——"

"Dastardly, despotic pretence of religion!"

Nathalie disregarded the ejaculation. "It is just possible that Serge could arrange it for you, if Uncle Jack and yourself want to get away in a hurry. I can ask him. I am sure he would not wish you to be detained here against your will," without a smile, but with a hint of meaning that her uncle noted. "The hand of the Russian Empire casts a shadow even over a subject of the King while you are under her power!" she insisted, with

a serious shake of her dainty head, as if to emphasise his helplessness.

"What does this rascally government take me for?" cried Sir James. "A spy perhaps! A mob inciter! A vulgar bomb-throwing peasant! A most unpleasant situation your impertinence has made for us all; dam'me if it isn't! Can't any one see that I am an English gentleman travelling in their cursed country against my will?"

"Well, you don't look this morning as if you were actually travelling, or as if it was for pleasure," agreed Nathalie, laughing at the notion with genuine amusement.

"This damned nonsense of yours makes me sick! Drop it, Nathalie; drop it, I say!"

"Drop what?"

"Drop this absurd notion of professing to be interested in this man you say you are interested in. Why, the very name Kazak means robber. All through the dark ages they despised marriages and kidnapped the mothers of the children that perpetuated them!"

"I suppose you think I must have eaten something that disagreed with me, to make me so unreasonable," suggested Nathalie, still taking him lightly to avoid a direct issue as long as possible. "Ever since I was a child, if I wanted to do anything you did not approve or understand, or if I cried or was bad, you have always declared to Aunt Netta that I must have eaten something! I suppose now that I am in love, you will lay it to the Russian table. Tea perhaps, on my nerves!"

"What occasioned such an attack is of no consequence to me," replied her guardian. "It is, to say the least, unwomanly to go off half cocked as you seem to have done over this Tartar from an uncivilised roving tribe

beyond the geographical limits of a gentleman. The only place for a Byzantine curio like him, after you bought him, would be in a museum."

She chose to ignore the insult to her lover, only saying, "Don't forget, dear, that the population of Russia is more than a quarter of all who live on the globe. There is such a thing as over-civilisation, I think. I often felt the truth of it in London."

"He is civilised enough to know the colour of your money," sneered Sir James. "He has need of it in a hurry, big sums, too—at times. He sold every stick of his furniture last March. Ask him why! And the English Consul tells me all these men know how to get the money into their own control. What laws are there out here to protect women? Do you know perhaps, that all your property will be in your husband's name? And your children brought up in heathendom and idol worship?"

He stopped for breath, and Nathalie said proudly, without seeming in the least abashed, "Serge is a patriot. Naturally his children will follow his faith."

"And your money," he sneered.

"If a woman cares enough for a man to give herself to him, it is stupid to make a stumbling-block of money," she insisted steadily.

"As for patriotism, damned funny patriot he is!" cried Sir James flushing.

"Been fined and shut up for insubordination within a week!"

"Did Watson or the English Consul report that last story to you?" she asked.

"That is by the argument. I dare say you were kept well in ignorance of it. It is there, and it can't be de-

nied. If he tries to lie out of it when you accuse him of it, send him to me!"

Suddenly his manner changed to a swift return of the old wheedling tones he always took with her in connection with his son. After all, it was easy enough to bring a woman round. He was a fool to have come so near getting excited over it. He was about to wipe out the whole unpleasantness by a fulsome compliment on her personal appearance, when she returned to the subject calmly enough, by asking:

"Would you call it a lack of patriotism, to refuse to empty your cartridge-box into a woman—an innocent, defenceless woman, ranged not more than six feet from the muzzle of your gun? I should call it murder; cold, cowardly murder at that," she pronounced solemnly.

"Don't argue, Nathalie!" said Sir James sternly. "Nothing is so far from fetching in a woman, to a man of discrimination, young or old. No man ever admires a woman who gabbles and tries to get in the last word. It is the habit of a shrew or a mere pot-house scold—not a lady. I am your guardian; your Aunt Netta's husband. It is enough for you to hear from me that this match you propose is not one to be considered for a moment. No, not for one moment! The scandal of your having lent yourself to such a scheme can be hushed up. It is, luckily, far away from the tongues of the social world, and the folly already committed can be condoned on the ground of this Cossack not being, as you may say, really like a regular person of established standing. It is not as if you had jilted a man in your own class—and all that sort of thing."

"I am not listening," remarked Nathalie incidentally.

"Don't make me angry, or you will regret it!" cried Sir James, the purple showing again in his temples.

"Well, then you must only speak such words as decent women can listen to without losing their self-respect," she warned him. "Don't forget that the Prince Royal is the Attman of the Cossacks. You are going on a false premise if you suppose their social caste inferior."

"On my word, you are a cool one! Dam'me if you aren't!" He admired her standing up to him. Hilary had never dared open rebellion. What a will to break, if one was the age to go in for that sort of sport with a woman! Aloud, he said with another change of voice, this time lower and more persuasive: "Think of your Aunt Janet—fancy Hilary! You know the terms of your uncle's will as well as I do."

"Too well ever to want to hear them alluded to again," she sighed wearily.

"Well, then, if you can't come to your senses and behave as a lady should, I shall assert myself. I shall, after all I have borne with your really immodest behaviour, make use of my authority and *command* you to obey."

He was helpless, angry, moreover an awful twinge of gout ran up his limb to his arm as he gestured, which made him lay it respectfully upon the velvet edge of his chair, as if it were a loaded rifle that would go off if jarred ever so slightly. Nathalie was by nature a little Vesuvius of emotions, loving impulses and loyalties. She had been an orphan beyond mature memory of either parent, craving always an intenser affection than her life had as yet provided. If Sir James had understood her well enough to appeal to their love and need of her, had he possessed sufficient insight to present their loss of her

as a real matter of personal sorrow, he might easily have touched her to tender response. But he was not a man who had ever made any one love anything. He could not begin now to make her love in retrospect what she had never clung to or reckoned with close at hand. Her American common sense confronted her uncle with the serenity of one whose position is final and unassailable.

"I beg your pardon, Uncle James," she said respectfully, "but you talk of commanding me, where you ought only to think of suggesting; leaving the rest to the chivalry of my heart. I tell you frankly, I am going to live my own life—not yours, or Aunt Netta's, or Hilary's. Money I care nothing for. Serge I care everything for. You may have all my fortune, or any part of it. Arrange it in your own way, please. Take whatever you can use. My soul is my own, exclusively. I intend it shall be, and with it I shall do as I think right."

Sir James took a new tack instantly.

"I don't wholly blame you! No, on my honour I don't—wholly blame you for your outbursts," he said. "You are an American of course, and one must not forget they have all sorts of wild ideas in the States. It all comes from giving a girl a notion she is an individual, and all that sort of thing, one fancies—instead of a cog in a system. It raises the deuce with the family and with society at large, elevating woman out of her sphere so, it's bound to—dam'me if it isn't!"

"A woman ran your social system pretty successfully for fifty or more years," inserted Nathalie.

"Our sainted Queen was a sovereign by divine right—one does not include her. But even so, she relied upon the support and counsel of the Prince Consort, as well as her Ministers of State. Women can't judge for them-

selves, they really ought not to be expected to. Nothing proves their weakness, their lack of head, like their supposing they can, don't you know?"

"I only know that I will not remain secondary to the money left me on the intricate terms of my uncle's will, an uncle I have never seen, at that! If I can make it all over to Hilary and go free myself, it is all I ask!"

"You do, then, recall the exact terms of the will?"

"Oh, what could be harder to forget? If I marry against your will I lose the inheritance, which goes in bulk to an unknown second cousin in Australia."

"It is rough on Hilary," sighed Sir James, silent before the impending calamity.

"That is all I care about any of it," cried Nathalie warmly, "that it deprives my Cousin Hilary of his half, the half, that is, which ought justly to have been his; left outright to him, without any regard to me. It is a preposterous will. My uncle ought to have divided between Hilary and me, or since I had my mother's fortune, to Hilary alone. He has been good to me, as far as he knew how; has tried to make me happy. I can't bear to rob him of his expectations, even though it is not my fault that my father's brother loved my own mother better than his own sister, my Aunt Janet."

"One wonders why he did it," meditated Sir James aloud.

"In the letter his lawyers sent me after his death, he wrote as his reason, because Mamma was a warm-hearted creature, incapable of policy, whose love was beyond price—and he hoped I might grow up to be like her—and—" she stopped short.

"And what?" he demanded.

"Oh, it seemed to be merely a personal affair—" she said hastily.

"I can tell you. It was to avenge that American cad who had the impudence to propose for your Aunt Janet. He was a friend of your precious uncle—fought in some war or other with him, and all that sort of thing."

"It broke a heart and spoiled a life, he said," she repeated, as if quoting from a letter long familiar.

"He did not mention that it saved your aunt's life and elevated her to a position in the English nobility?" Sir James's sneer had no effect, and he blundered on the right course at last, by sheer accident, as he sighed commiseratingly: "Hilary was not brought up to work. Poor boy! If he loses you, and his right to the half provided for him in the will if he succeeds in winning you, it will make life turn the cold shoulder emphatically. It astonishes one most of all that you feel no natural affection for your aunt, no sense of obligation for all the care she has lavished on you. She is no longer young, Nathalie, and a sad invalid—a wreck of her youthful self as she was when I married her. It was a great disappointment to a man with an Englishman's love of physique and natural desire to keep up an important family and strengthen it with wide connections through his children."

His face sobered alarmingly to the imagination of the girl opposite. Had he been keeping something back? Was some real and untold trouble coming out at last, wrung from him in extremity?

"I had depended on Hilary's inheriting that half, at least," he continued, speaking lower, and leaning toward her confidentially—for Watson sometimes hovered sur-

prisingly nearer than one was aware—"I had counted on Janet's having at least half the fortune of her American brother, indirectly, to insure her comfort. It will cut her up a good bit to give up her luxury. But we shall have to cut off and cut down. Stocks have gone to the dogs lately and the tenants run behind. Even if I let Windfell this summer and autumn, it will mean retrenchment beyond stopping on in the London house, unless you come to your senses pretty soon."

Nathalie's eyes softened visibly. "On the right track at last!" thought Sir James to himself. "Pity is the right note to take with women, of course." He tried not to show his complacency in the success of his diplomatic turn as he heard her generous reply.

"Why didn't you say this to me before, Uncle James? I had no idea you were in any such emergency. If it is only money that is necessary to your peace of mind and the happiness of Aunt Netta and Hilary, we need not call each other hard names a minute longer. To me, this dirty money is only a cause of impatience, almost a shame. My father's people have toiled and sold and got more, and died and left others to begin the process over again—to toil and sell and get more. There was no radiating inspiration, no glorifying end, no great love of an ideal that rose to combat their greed for money, money, money! And now it is left to curse me. It is my turn. I hate it! Let me stay among these soldiers that share alike. I have no ambitions that you would recognise as ambitions. Let me marry Serge, and you go home and take all the money and use it. To toil and scheme and make more and die is not life for me, and I want to live!" She came to his side, her fingers coaxingly clasped about his hand, her glowing face lifted

entreatingly. "Dear Uncle James, if you consent to my marriage, that will do away with half the trouble and secure me half the inheritance—and I will settle every penny of it on Hilary immediately, I swear it!"

Sir James blinked rather unsteadily. "You are a deucedly game sport, Nathalie," he cried under his breath. "Dam'me if you aren't!"

She kissed him rapturously. "Then everybody will live happy ever after!" She gave it as a cry of relief and the tears brimmed for a moment. Peril had faced her so close!

"It is all very Quixotic to talk about, but you can't toss fortunes down the wind regardless of the courts and public procedure," Sir James reminded her, himself unconvinced. "English law will never admit such barbarism, my dear Nathalie, as you will see upon reflection."

"But you have consented, Uncle James? You do consent? You agree to my proposition in general effect?" She drew nearer, fearing to lose the advantage gained.

"Suppose I did—you would then consent to go back to England at once and submit to the legalities, I assume?"

Her bright face sobered. "Could not the English Consul arrange it all, right here? I thought if I signed a few papers I should be free. Serge may be mobilised at any hour and it is a Cossack law to be eternally ready for battle or for flight."

Sir James seemed to be deliberating. "I should say it would not be possible. One does not want a stranger pottering in one's affairs. The family solicitor would naturally put in a claim for right to settle so important a transaction. Leatherby would scarcely fail to take offence over any action so irregular. Better go home

and be properly advised. It is no small event to give away a fortune, even if one has a larger left over."

"How long should I have to be away from Russia?" her question came as if it sickened her.

"Not more than a month or so, I fancy. Your aunt would try to keep you, of course, but for the business solely, it would not be liable to detain you beyond the formal procedure and signatures—unless you were to change your mind, or Hilary was able to change it for you, eh?" with an attempt to be playful.

"A month!" she echoed blankly. "I cannot do it then. Catherine will be going in a week or two, probably with our own regiment. Everything could happen in a month!"

Possibly that may have occurred to his lordship. He patted her hand as if she had been a rebellious colt that he was intent upon getting past an obstacle in the road without a spill. Disregarding the provoking "our regiment," he soothed her with, "So, so, don't get excited about it. What is a month or so?" Then, more reassuringly, "This Cossack is mad enough about you to wait. He will be faithful a month, a month on the start, too. It is not like a month years hence, when your eyes are less like stars. Absence has a charm for lovers, so the poets all tell us."

This last was an imprudent admission. He saw and regretted it at once. "You know you are not saying the truth," said Nathalie hotly. "You are thinking even now that he is only a Russian! That he will get over it! He will forget her! And she will go back to England, and all this nonsense will fade out—like some bright dream. You are at this very instant complimenting yourself on your tact, in not raising an issue with a

silly woman unable to argue or reason; but, nevertheless, taking me back to England in good order, and perhaps—who knows?—marrying me to Hilary in spite of myself. I see it all. I am not in the least deceived by your attitude.”

He did not contradict her. He was a trifle appalled by her penetration. It might be awkward if she persisted in it.

“You made a sensible proposition, for a wonder, and I was simply offering to help you carry it out,” he said at last. “I am not giving my consent to such a marriage as you anticipate, without compunction. It is only conditionally given and may be withdrawn if I see fit. But if you were sincere in your desire to provide for your aunt in her accustomed luxury, in consideration of her devotion to you, after wringing her heart by refusing to become the daughter she so much longs to call you, you will be obliged to act as I have indicated. There is no alternative.”

Nathalie blanched. She rose and stood before her uncle like an accusing angel. The fling of her head added inches to her little imperious form. Her lips would quiver helplessly, but her voice was firm and hard. Her uncle wished she would cry. He understood tears and rated them at their proper value. There was a glitter about her eyes that brought home to his stolidity the actual suffering of an animal caught in a cruel trap. Her words came slowly and with perfect comprehension of their situation toward each other.

“No, Uncle James. I understand you. I see all your policy. I go prepared. For I will go—for Aunt Janet’s sake. It is right. But I will stay exactly seven days. If Mr. Leatherby and you cannot get the law over in

that time, then I am sorry, but it will cease to involve me. I warn you beforehand, so you can do the best possible thing for yourself and all of us. If you trick me I will never forgive you and I will do some harm to pay you for it before I die, in some way that will hurt only you. I know to-day how my uncle felt when he drew up the will I am dishonouring. I understand how he felt toward you, and why he was unwilling to leave even a part of his fortune to the nephew who was your son. You make me disrespectful by making me distrust you. You took Aunt Netta from her lover for her money, and if hers tempted you why should not mine?"

She turned from him, choking with disappointment and terror of the risk she ran in trusting herself in England under his representations of a necessity that might prove a decoy. "I adore him," she said hoarsely. "I adore him! I have never had any one to love me first, or to whom I belonged, or who claimed all my love. I know one of us will die before I get back to him. But if I do," she clenched her small fist and set her small teeth, "I will haunt you every hour of your life, Uncle James!"

Not a tear! She left him, not outraged by her insolence, but indecently near sharing a reflection of her emotion. Fine girl! In retrospect he allowed himself to be quite carried away by her dash and courage. His reverie was cut short, and the remorse that might have been, eliminated, by the entrance of Watson bearing a small tray.

"You look put h'out, Sir," he said deferentially. "I do 'ope, Sir, you have not been a h'upsetting of yourself, Sir. H'it's so 'orrid for the constitution, Sir!"

"Never have any dealings with a woman, Watson," cautioned Sir James strenuously.

"Oh, no, Sir, and grateful to you, Sir, for taking such a kindly h'interest in my h'affairs, Sir," said Watson, setting down the tray. "'Ere's your malted milk, Sir."

"Put it down and get the oldest Scotch, that old honey-dew 57. I am a bit done up," confessed Sir James. Watson looked more funereal than ever, which was his way of expressing doubt.

"Why, my good fellow, that can't hurt me!" said his master with an assumption of vigorous cheer that was rather a forced performance. "That is half a century old!"

"True, true, Sir," admitted Watson. "H'its h'only the h'inferior h'article that's h'upsetting, isn't it, Sir?"

"True, indeed, Watson, except in woman," he added slyly. He started to make another motion indicative of superior knowledge of that "h'upsetting" sex, but the need to hide the tragic pain from Watson brought him soberly to a close. For Watson could be firm and had even been known to insist on adherence to professional orders, prohibiting game paté and red wine, on which he looked askance, since gout meant "a 'orrid 'ell of a time," as he had been heard to confide to his fellow servants below stairs in Park Lane upon more than one lurid occasion.

"Here, Watson," said Sir James now, throwing out a small shower of English gold upon the table. "Go out and wire your mistress to expect us this day week. And here, get the tickets. You might as well."

"Yes, Sir. For h'all of us, Sir?" enquired Watson.

"Certainly, by all means." Still Watson did not start. His eyes were fixed upon the bottle labelled Honey-Dew.

"Shall I remove the—litter, Sir?" he suggested respectfully.

"No hurry, no hurry," mumbled Sir James genially. "We shall all feel better once we have our home passage taken."

"Begging your pardon, Sir, but you said for h'all of us. Three or four, Sir, was the meaning of h'all?"

"Four," said Sir James positively. Watson beamed. He had an eye for an heiress himself and resented their transportation from old England.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir. I suppose so, Sir. And if I may make so free, h'it's very welcome h'orders, Sir!"

It was not until his footfall had ceased to sound along the hallway that Sir James ventured to pour a second glass up to the third finger and toast himself on England's latest conquest.

His interview with his brother-in-law was less roscate. Mainwaring was strongly unsympathetic.

"Going, is she? There is something sublime in her unselfishness. She is a brave child," he said in broken periods not calculated to add to Sir James's self-satisfaction. "She plays life as if it were a game of give-away, while the rest of the world plays checkers. She acts on the golden rule, in short; no wonder it is confusing to men like you and me!"

"That is the Churchman's principle," said Sir James, unabashed by the insinuation. "Of course a literal interpretation of the Scripture is by way of being embarrassing in the twentieth century," he went on pompously. But Mainwaring cut him short, remarking drily:

"Among Churchmen, I should say, it might be."

CHAPTER XI

DA SVIDANYA

How inextricably the threads of fate are woven was never clearer shown than in this instance of the will that had turned against the intention of its maker. In spite of all precaution it had placed Nathalie at last in the power of the very man from whom it was designed to protect her. Her father's older brother had seen no good in Sir James Blount, or Lady Janet either, after she accepted him. And he looked for nothing worthy of perpetuation in their heir. If Nathalie saw enough in him to wish to marry him, he was prepared to relent, because of his unmitigated faith in her, or possibly because he was so secure in his belief that Hilary would never be the man her heart would demand. He had set about making his will with every precaution—a sort of posthumous joke on British expectations. It had been his last amusement. It entertained him in his last days of lingering weakness, to count over the lists of securities that he had controlled and schemed for until they had amounted to a startling sum, sufficient to put his orphaned niece in a position of consequence. He was leaving her a fortune to be reckoned with. His aversion to his brother-in-law had become a motive in life until this end was attained. He had never forgiven him for robbing his own boy-friend, Dan Maverick, of his sweetheart. He did not intend him to steal another fortune from the family, however legitimate the process might be made to appear, nor to have the right to patronise or unduly

influence Nathalie in her choice for her own future. The will stated that she was to inherit unconditionally, unless she married without her guardian's consent. In this case it all reverted to the son of a favourite cousin in Australia, a clause as bitter to the testator as to Sir James himself, inserted to prevent any attempt to tamper with the girl's own inclination. If Sir James pressed Hilary's claim, the disposing guardian had but to object and away went the fortune, and with it the desirability of the match. Her fortune from her mother was not important enough to consider as bait to men with estates to be kept up and a public to be impressed. So he died at last assured that neither Sir James Blount nor any of kin were to profit by the Yankee dollars that survived him in witness of his successful life. Alas for mortal infallibility! The deceased had suffered his hands to be folded in rigid content, as the dead must, whether their wills be framed to chasten their nearest relatives satisfactorily or not, but the young American selected by him to fill the office of guardian was killed within a month, in a scandalous railroad wreck, clearing the way for the English uncle as a natural successor; Mainwaring, who would have been chosen for the position, being in South America, doing interior stunts with his base in the air, while his mail piled up unheeded in a tropical town of indifferent civilisation. The legal representatives of the dead man did oppose the arrangement, but Nathalie annulled their authority. She was consulted, but did not care who her guardian was, since it was a nominal matter. She had lived for years under the same roof with her Uncle James and found him thus far an easy mark for her small wheedlings. She had done as she liked ever since she could remember, she intended to con-

tinue in this serene habit. Until it was too late for interference, she was unaware of the deep distrust felt for the English uncle by the wary American. So the last wishes of the dead were ridden over rough-shod by the living, and Sir James was left in ultimate control. He had used it thus far only to shepherd the intercourse of Nathalie and his son, but not until this Russian escapade had he been pushed to extremes. The girl had been of age only a few months, so, no issue being raised, their unanimity had been unbroken. To-day their relation was changed forever, at least in her eyes. After her interview with Sir James as an enemy openly declared, she realised the folly of her rash consent to thwart the dead in a sacred project. She found herself regarding her future as full of unsuspected pitfalls, intrigue and a dogged will, opposed to her own simple hope for the best joy of a woman's life—marriage with the man she loves. At first her thoughts of her dead benefactor were bitterly ungrateful.

"I am uncle-ridden!" she protested to Jack Mainwaring. "The quick and the dead are both after me. It is not fair! Between you all, you will destroy my happiness."

It was at the end of a long, serious conversation between them. They had come to terms only after hours painful to them both, but without anger, and in a fond understanding of each other's hearts. Mainwaring had been firm, but Nathalie had been adamant. He might convince her a hundred times and she would in the end act as she had determined. Mainwaring alternately despaired of the futility of his brother's effort in her behalf, and grieved over her sacrifice in returning to England with Sir James. He had to comfort himself with

her assurance that if a shrewd man had seen a side in her English uncle to be distrusted, she would sufficiently profit by these fears to keep her eyes open. Traps should not snare her in the dark. They were to be enemies declared, and in an open fight. Mainwaring was sufficiently just to suffer for her and for his brother, but the living claimed his final assent, and he gave up the struggle and left her to live her own life, hoping for fire from heaven to save her from ultimate regret or an overwhelming ultimate best as her reward. His suspicion of the holy Russian Empire had been a good deal modified by his increasing respect for Serge and utterly disarmed by the daily companionship of Catherina Ivanovna, with her passionate patriotism and her low voice that he could yet hear when he had left her.

The uncles, coming to pass the evening after these determining interviews, at the Bruhlowski, with Catherine, were supernaturally gracious, self-accusing in courtesy. With his tickets for Berlin in his pocket, Sir James became mellow to affability; a type of the well-informed Englishman on his travels, prejudicing information and absorbing comparisons favourable to his own country with true John Bull tenacity. Jack Mainwaring hovered about his niece in wider circles, disapproving, but gentle in his appreciation of her sacrifice for others. Nothing touched the hard surface presented by the girl herself. Her guns were grounded, but by the same token they were loaded.

"I admire you for wanting to do the square thing by everybody," Uncle Jack ventured to say to her in the first opportunity for an aside. "I can't consent to your going, but I can't forbid it either, I suppose."

"Uncle James makes my going the condition of his consent to my marriage," was her brief reply.

"But you are going voluntarily. It is your own affair, after all. You cannot be forced against your will," he reminded her anxiously.

"I am betrayed by my own conscience, by my duty to my aunt," she said hastily. "Otherwise I should never agree to these terms. Nothing could have forced me. I saw that I must go back to do my duty. There is no love in it. I am going for duty's sake, only to be kind to Aunt Netta."

"Sacrifice is a beautiful ornament to a woman's character," he murmured with a fervour meant for Catherine.

"I never was crazy about it myself," she said, unmoved. "I think women develop better under happiness than eternally being crossed."

"You will come back none the worse for a taste of real life. You might as well get your teeth in on reality now as at any time. You can't expect it to be an exception for you. I am surprised to find myself so heartily hoping you will be back soon. I have looked into a good many things out here, in a quiet way. There is a lot to be said for Russia!"

As the others fell silent, Catherine took this as a hint that the personal nature of their tête-à-tête was finished, and said earnestly:

"But, my friends, this is not Russia! Nothing here is Russian except the officials and the soldiers. Go to Moscow, Kieff, even Petersburg, to see our Russia!"

"That is not a bad idea. I will," said Jack Mainwaring eagerly. "I have always wanted to see Moscow."

Catherine's face was illuminated by one of her own rare smiles.

"Akh! Holy Mother Moscow!" she exclaimed. "It holds my memories as the Kremlin holds the sovereigns and the past of Moscow herself." It is the holy city, the ancient capital of the Tsars."

"I will go," he promised with decision. "You may tear up my ticket back to Berlin,"—this to Sir James—"I am going to India when I get ready." Then, after a pause for their various expressions of opinion as to his change of plan, he said again: "Yes, I have changed my opinions a good deal out here, all the same. Take the Jews, to begin on. I have reversed my engines there. I have got my illusions pretty well overturned about them."

"The Jews are money-makers and capitalists the world over," remarked Sir James blandly, conciliatory in the wrong quarter.

"He does not work," objected the American.

"He does worse, at least with the officers," said Serge. "For an officer to live on his pay at Petersburg it is impossible without corruption. The Jew lends willingly. At first the rate of usury is endurable. In a month he asks more; in a second month, double. In a short time his interest alone is more, far more, than the original debt. Then if the officer cannot pay—and how can he pay, unless he gambles with success?—there remains for the poor debtor only two exits: Suicide or Siberia." Catherine's face clouded. "It is an affair of every day, well known to all," he added, noting her displeasure.

Sir James exchanged glances with Jack Mainwaring. Nathalie felt it without intercepting it with her own.

"It is not with the army alone that the Jew makes death," Serge continued. "He is everywhere. With the

peasant it is the same story. The Jew, he spins his web like the great spider, at ease. He watches his neighbour, while his neighbour works, then when he is in some difficulty the Jew lends him a few kopeck. Then all his life the peasant works for the Jew. Never again is he free!"

"Trade admits them as a growing force," said Sir James. "They deal closely, but he bargains no closer than his adversary permits"—England without Jewish capital suddenly occurring to him as an undesirable condition.

"He is not fair," contradicted Serge, with a gentleness oddly belying his contradiction. "Never is he fair, but with the poor peasant he does his dastardly worst. When the peasant and his family have toiled for days, and during the cruel early winter by the cheap oil lamps, less dear than candle light, he walks or perhaps drives by sledge through the cold to the nearest market. There the Jew is waiting, concealing his eagerness beneath a feigned disgust. Late in the day, when night is already begun, he consents to take the peasant's load at a reduced price. How can the poor peasant remain? He has no money. Already he hears the wolf howling at his heels. He accepts the miserable terms. Then the Jew says to him that he has not enough money to pay all, he will pay part. So he forces the hungry man, disappointed and perhaps desperate, to take the other part in raw material for future work, selling it at a higher price than the market legitimately demands. It is for your English Shakespeare to cry, 'O just Jew!' They are everywhere, Russia has not a monopoly of their wickedness!"

"Why does not the Tsar help his poor peasants? He would if he knew," cried Nathalie. "I know he would!"

"That is what the peasant always says, when he is ill-

treated or cold or hungry," Serge told her encouragingly. "At home, or on the field, they say, 'If the Tsar knew!' They trust him always. He is as God to them in their misery."

"Russia has not a monopoly of any special form of darkness, I guess," said Mainwaring. "It is a nation of caste, wealth, enormous resource and terrific military liability. You know how to wait too."

"We have only been civilised since Napoleon," Serge admitted. "Give us a hundred years more and our white night will yield to the twentieth century dawn."

"Hurrah for the Russian spirit!" cried Nathalie.

But Sir James dampened their enthusiasm by remarking retrospectively, "Only civilised since Napoleon—ah, very right, very true."

"The shadow lies heaviest across the peasant, of course," sighed Catherine.

"You are doing an enormous work right there," said Mainwaring. "Others may think of him as a dull brute or a malefactor, but we know he was a slave only yesterday. America knows what it is to confront a revolution in social conditions."

"Yes, indeed," said Nathalie. "We have the race problem to confront, with the colour problem thrown in."

"I should say we had!" Mainwaring agreed. "And what have we made of it? Killed the Indians and up against the negro! Call 'em niggers still, down in Dixie!"

"What have you done for the negro?" Catherine was ready at once with her quick tenderness for the oppressed. "Does your government ever give them land, as we do?"

"I never heard that it did."

"What have you done then? Anything we may emulate?"

"We have talked about him!" said Nathalie wickedly.

"Yes," said Mainwaring, "and handed him over to a few industrial schools, or as a plaything for the philanthropic millionaire. If Russia has a plan for her ex-slaves that works out intelligently, she is ahead of us there!"

"The fittest survive without assistance," observed Sir James dispassionately. "Look at England! Does she try to make gentlemen of coolies? Thistle-made figs are not good enough for the British market."

Serge waited respectfully till they had finished speaking, then he turned to the American, saying, "In Russia, the government gives five acres of land and a hut to the peasant, the tax being two roubles a year."

"To supply occupation is a problem for the sphinx, but we are slowly solving it," said his sister. "Remember they are without education, trade, or the self-confidence of the free-born."

"You have no middle class in Russia, that is the death of you," explained Sir James. "Your lower class has no longing for improvement. They are sunk in generations of serfdom. What can you expect, unless some nation takes your civilisation in hand for you?"

"Ah, it is true, we have variations without number in our problems," said Serge deferentially. "We have the savage Cossacks"—with a smile at Nathalie—"and the peaceful peasant of the Nijny fair, the wandering tribes of the Khircze, the influence of Asiatic blood, European tendencies, Siberian rigours, Oriental stupors. To make perfect order at once, it is not possible, even for His

Imperial Majesty. But our horizon, our future—it is boundless.”

“But in art and literature she has surpassed her economic conditions,” said Catherine urgently.

“Ah, Russian art and literature, it is not known to them!” cried Serge passionately.

But both Americans met his statement with positive denial. “We are not barbarians,” insisted Mainwaring. “We know your writers, we hear your music, your painters are exhibited in New York. Every country library has a copy of some book of Tolstoi.”

“Yes?” dubiously, “although every writer is held to be a bear who ought to be kept in chains. Tolstoi is known even in America?”

Mainwaring nodded energetically, but, as if fearful that his brother-in-law might destroy the harmony of the moment, added, as if returning to his first practical standpoint, “Her possibilities are endless. I wish I might live to see what she makes of them!”

Sir James drew himself up in his chair. “This is all new to you, Mainwaring, but England has known it always. She will never permit the least infringement upon the balance of power.”

Mainwaring was silent, but Nathalie nodded knowingly at him, saying wisely: “England will wake up some day and find a sword stuck through that pretty whimsy. I hope it will be a Cossack lance that pierces it too.”

Sir James turned upon her in exasperation. “Don’t argue, Nathalie,” he said. “I hate argument, as you have heard me say. Nothing is less becoming in a woman. One learns to take things for granted in England. That is what English repose means—taking established things for granted. It is only the ignorant who

run about trying to overturn precedents." He made a slightly deprecating gesture, as he turned toward Catherine, adding, "You will pardon me, madame, for saying that though one admits the undisputed size of your country, it can hardly be included in Europe's plans for higher civilisation."

Nathalie abruptly stepped out upon the balcony, followed by Serge. Watson, arriving with due punctuality to see Sir James home at a prudent hour, was never a more welcome intruder.

"Uncle Jack has gone over to Russia," whispered Nathalie, peeping in a little later from the moonlit balcony at the American, who had lingered to chat with the soft-voiced woman of his summer plans. "He has got the double-eagles in his blood." Later, when they rejoined those inside, Nathalie accused her uncle of his traitorship. He smiled rather wistfully, though his face was unusually grave as he confessed to it. "I see what bewitches you out here, little girl. I do not blame you a bit. I am going to lose myself in this gigantic wonderland for a while, but I shall come back to give the bride away, whether it is to be done in a mosque or under the four golden bulbs of St. Ignace, or just over the frontier in some German town."

Serge held himself erect, with lowered eyes as if receiving orders from a superior.

"It is more than charming of you to say it," he said when Mainwaring had finished. "My heart will never forget to thank you for your kind words."

It suddenly struck the American that this Tartar was not having a very heavenly time of it with the supreme civilisation of Great Britain, after all. He might even have suffered pretty keenly all along, under the skin.

Something prompted him to take the hand of the young soldier and wring it heartily within his own, upon which Nathalie beamed radiantly, crying, "Of course you will come back! I always counted on you. You are all of my own kith and kin, except Aunt Netta, and she has no emotions left for any one after her nerves get their share. Only," she cautioned, shaking her finger at him, "don't be too long away! We are Cossacks and we must be always ready!"

"They won't send the men from the garrison here, not till the last gasp," he ventured. "Somebody has got to keep an eye on Germany. Yours is the strategic position, is it not?" appealing to Serge for confirmation.

"Varsovie is defended by fifteen forts, detached one from the other," replied Serge. It was non-committal, but perhaps it was not intended to be evasive, this answer.

"You see, Nathalie, your Cossack won't be put at real war in this campaign. To any practical mind that appears at a glance. Meantime you can learn marital tactics at your leisure."

Neither Serge nor Catharine disputed the conclusion, and bidding them an affectionate good-night Mainwaring withdrew, leaving the lovers to their own protracted observance of that pretty ceremony.

Imperceptibly the hours melted away, carrying their last day together beyond all hail. Both trusted blindly to some accident rising to prevent the impending tragedy of parting. Until their last afternoon had forced itself upon them, they could not believe the end had really overtaken them. For the last time they had been driving together in the brilliant Ladozenski Park and were now strolling sadly through the wooded paths. They had not cared to feed the carp to-day, nor even to admire the

swans. Catherine could not endure the sight of their mute suffering and had offered to leave them while she returned to her own affairs, sending the carriage back to pick them up later. It was already twilight, a few carriages only remaining, and these hurrying homeward. They lingered in spite of the increasing solitude of the place.

"For the last time," Serge had said, in excuse for their delaying, as he had said of everything since her resolution to return to England had been explained to him. His melancholy was irresistible. Since he had proved unable to shake her in her determination, he had received every profession of her love for him, and every assurance of her return, with a gentle fatalistic incredulity. It was a despairing task to force him to listen and even pretend to believe. Indeed, to believe, he seemed unable. Absorbed in his own suffering, or the bewilderment of her impending desertion, he would not, or could not understand or hope. He loved her as a flower loves the sun; turning to her for all there was of light; turning to her with his glowing chalice of life lifted for her overflowing. Without her would be the darkness. Already he was folding his protecting reserve about his heart, shielding himself from the full disaster of the coming absence. "I hear what you say—oh, yes, I understand," he replied persistently in his soft voice, pain written on every line of his mobile, unsmiling face. "Your uncle commands you and you go. It is over."

"My uncle cannot command me. He has not the right," Nathalie re-explained with unwearying patience. "If my own heart did not tell me to go, that I owed this as reparation to my aunt, nothing could drag me away."

"How women are different from men!" Serge sighed with evident irrelevance.

"Why? What makes you say that so reproachfully?"

"My heart could never tell me to go from you!"

"I shall only be gone from you two weeks, and mine will scream at me to hurry back, every moment of the time."

"You think so—yes, I know you do think so, my Light-on-Kasbek. But not your uncle. He understands life better."

"He does not understand my heart!"

"He cannot comprehend my soul," said Serge slowly, lifting his face to the setting sun.

"He does not reckon with souls, and never has," she answered. "Please, dear, smile at me once or I shall go mad. You are cruel to be so final!"

"How funny women are!" he cried, without a smile. "Could you smile if the cruelest torture was piercing you? If you can smile and go from me, at least I am too savage to be able to do the same. My love for you, it is not something to smile over. It is my God in heaven, and you take it from me and ask me to smile!" His bitterness terrified her.

"You know you are not reasonable now. It is a mere question of money. It can all be settled as such in a short time," she said, trying to seem calm.

"Do you care for this dirty money?" he asked wistfully. She shook her head. "I have heard the English are all like that, like your uncle—a nation of shopkeepers, Europe calls them, but the Americans are a free people. They would scorn to buy a woman. You are not English—" he paused, leaving the inference to her.

Inexplicably, a sudden chill distrust ran over her.

What if this money did mean more to him than he was willing to have her think? Uncle James had insinuated his repeated raising of large sums. Catherine had said frankly that he had used three fortunes in a few years. Was he really disappointed in the loss of her inheritance?

"Are you so disdainful of money yourself?" she asked quickly. "Serge, they tell me you know what it is to want money in large sums. My uncle has tried to exasperate me by his taunts, hinting that your private affairs have influenced you in your love for me. I have met his accusation with the silence such slander deserves, but if you regret my giving away this money, tell me so frankly; do not let me suppose it is your heart that is broken! Money is so easily arranged, and if you will tell me——"

She was never to forget the scorn with which he met her only effort to penetrate his private life. "Whatever you may hear said of me is a part of my mystery," he said, as if that must amply suffice, the hard, implacable expression spreading over him as if a coat of mail had suddenly encased him. Nathalie drew back. There was a mystery then, probably nothing that concerned her. She made another effort at composure as she began again to go over the situation as clearly as possible.

"Serge, you must listen to me, like a sensible person. If I marry against the wishes of my guardian, the money left me by my dead uncle goes to a cousin in Australia, my cousin Hilary Blount gets nothing. My uncle and aunt have lost money. It will mean loss of position, even privation, to people accustomed to every luxury as they are. I have bought my freedom to marry you by trading this inheritance for my uncle's consent. Hilary never loved me. He wanted to marry me for this money. He

may even love some one else now—he could never love me as I want to be loved.”

“How did you know if he loved you as you wanted to be loved?” His jealousy flared up on the instant.

“He could not love as you love, my Glorious! No man could!”

“And you have dared to propose to him, to exchange this fortune for yourself?”

“Exactly.”

“Do you know what I would do if you dared to insult me in such a manner? I would shoot you.” He looked straight into her eyes.

“Hilary is not a man to shoot a woman for any reason.”

“He is not a man at all, if he will listen to such a proposal. It is true in his picture he looks perfectly dancing-master—not a soldier!” he added.

She passed over his parenthesis. “He not only will consent, he has consented,” she told him, “at least through his father. You see you ought not to be so desperate about this brief parting of ours——”

“But I am perfectly desperate!” he said mournfully.

“Don’t be unreasonable; you see how I am placed. If the money goes away from them all it wrongs poor Aunt Netta, the only sister of the dead man who ought to have provided for her. If I go back and settle it upon her, Uncle James’s hold on me is relaxed, and I shall not have to take my happiness with a stain of personal regret for my selfishness.”

“To me, it is perfectly a trap,” he said dispassionately, falling into his idiomatic way of speaking, as he did when he was deeply moved. “If you leave me, he consents you shall marry me, after you give him your

fortune. If you stay with me and keep your fortune, what can he do to prevent us? Nothing! You can share with your aunt as much of your fortune as you wish. To me it is as if he tossed up a coin and always it fell to his own loss, and always he cried out with glee to you that he wins and you lose."

"I must have left out something, for it sounds differently as you put it. I cannot make you see the complications," she said, frowning at her lack of ability. "But it cannot be arranged without my presence—without these formalities he will not consent. By going home for this little time everybody will be made satisfied, and no ill-will be following us. It really seems due my aunt. You see, don't you, Dorogoi?" using her Russian blandishment to touch him with her plea.

"I see only that you are going," he replied, as if he had heard nothing she had said. "It is over."

"Akh, Dusha moya"—quoting Catherine's usual exclamation—"how difficult you make it for me! I shall come back! I shall, I shall!" she reiterated.

"Oh, no, Galubshka, my little dear, gold ray of the sun; you think so, but your uncle knows better. You go now from Russia forever."

"If I thought so I would kill myself!"

"The Russian proverb says you cannot die twice, but you cannot avoid dying once. This is death for me, this parting. My life is over when you bid me farewell."

The sun dropped. A chill crept around them. He held her hand, but now he had begun to pace as far as he could without dropping it, and, turning to repace the few feet thus permitted him, exactly as he always did under excitement, as the striped tiger does under rage or hunger. She had so often seen him pace Catherine's

salon with this same, light, eager tread of the jungle. She knew it betokened unrest beyond his self-control.

"I shall come back," she repeated helplessly. "Who can prevent me?"

His only answer was another proverb, "'The Tsar reigns at Moscow, the Cossack on the Don.' Once in England, your guardian will prevent you. At first your guardian, and after—the lover he has chosen for you." Before she could resent this or defend herself, his whole mood had changed. He ceased his restless pacing, and in a voice quivering with pain said very softly, as he seized her hands in his own: "Nathalie, little dove, do not go and leave me alone without you." Her face gave him what he wanted, and he continued passionately, "If I beg you not to abandon me? If I pray of you as I would pray of the God in the sky? If I get the Russian Ambassador or Consul to arrange all details for you? My sister and her husband will do all that is possible to help us. Ah, say you will not go! I have powerful connections who can do all, even that which for others is impossible—say you do not want to go!"

"You know it," she whispered thickly.

"Darling, then you will not refuse me this one favour? I badly need you. I am of the nature that cannot live separated from what it loves. I lose my sister in a few days, and I lose you—I shall be as the mad! I shall find myself alone upon this earth with no home for my heart. I shall do surely something desperate! Why do you wish to poison my life? Why did you come to break my soldier dream? I was making for myself a military fame. I was *bon camarade*, courted on all sides. I did love life so strongly, and I harmed no one! Now all is changed. I am a suffering victim of this passion I can-

not resist. I live only in your presence, and you want to go away from me. Cruel!" He bent over her more closely, holding her hands firm against his heart, that galloped wildly as a charger in battle. She felt it and it unnerved her, though she knew she must not yield. "You will not go?" he begged, this time hoarsely.

"I will come back," she stammered, "I give you my solemn American promise. You know that is sacred." She tried to smile, she hoped he might smile, but neither could make that effort now. Serge released her hands and shook his head sadly.

"You think so, but I have a fatal premonition, Dushenka moya. You will be prevented. It is over."

Even in her own heart she could not convict him of obstinacy. He was simply a broken-hearted child who could not look beyond the misery of the hour. She was sure he would have unhesitatingly bought a week's happiness together now, with a year's parting at some later time. She wanted to be vexed with him for his distrust of her, but his pain was too real. It disarmed her. Before she could make another effort to comfort him, he spoke again, reluctantly, scanning her face as if to read her inmost thought. "If you refuse me all," he said, "will you do one little thing for me now? Even if to you it is but foolishness? Will you grant me a favour to my Cossack superstition? To comfort me?"

Her eyes were dim as she lifted them to his own. "Anything, Serge."

"You will not smile at my request?" As he spoke his hand went to his throat, and he drew forth the Cossack amulet of chrysolite, the Cossack's dearest treasure and talisman. He removed it from his neck and put it about her own. "At least it will keep you in the holy care,"

he murmured, his devotion to her blending with his reverence for the sacred emblem. "You will not take it off ever, my white Swan? You give me your most sacred promise?" he insisted. She signed her assent. A sudden weakness of misgiving swept over her. What if his fatalism should be true?

"Serge! You will wait for me? Even if I should be longer than I think? You will not forget me? No other woman shall steal you from me?" she gasped. Her breath came sharply as if she had been running. She felt it catch. Something stifling hurt her in her throat, as she heard him swear it, with a tragic face.

"No other woman shall exist for me! Until I go to sleep with the passport of Saint Nicholas in my clenched hand. I will flee them as Ermak fled from Ivan the Terrible! It is farewell," he added solemnly, kissing her on her brow, as one takes leave of the dead. As he laid his face an instant on hers, she felt the incredible, man's tears drop upon her hair. Then in her fright and passion her self-control gave way, and she who never wept fell to weeping in great shuddering, racking sobs.

"I cannot, I cannot!" she cried, flinging herself into his arms. "I love you, I love you!" Serge was beside himself at sight of her passion, for the first time fully betrayed.

"Dushenka, Galubushka, if you weep I will kill myself!" he cried distractedly. "It is my fault; I was mad with love and jealousy. I am wicked to make your dear heart suffer. It is this cursed plot to get you away from Russia that drives me out of my senses. You are my sun, my golden light, my Heaven"—Kisses then, and tears—they clung to each other as if together they were meeting or eluding death; an embrace as reckless on her

part as on his, strained to each other as if to hold time and space at bay. He let her feel the iron of his grip as he caught her to him, as if not he but the wild ancestry of his race compelled him. She let him crush her in the elation of an almost equal instinct of primitive joy. She let him hurt her. She wished he would kill her then and there.

When the carriage came round to the appointed rendezvous she was too exhausted to do more than try to dry the tears upon his face. He lifted her bodily and placed her within. He was as indifferent to the outward evidence of his recent experience as had he been alone in the world.

His fatalism was contagious. Catherine wisely remained with the lovers through the evening, as if aware that her unspoken sympathy held a certain healing for them, and they were mercifully spared the uncles. Nathalie, mute and miserable in the shadow of her forebodings, could not recover her courage. At last Serge began to make his familiar feint of going and returning. Catherine withdrew, and they were left to themselves for the last time. He tried to wrest himself from Nathalie, only to turn back blindly after each farewell for one more embrace. Only once he broke down and asked her to stay.

"Stay with me, Nathalie moya, and the bells you love shall chime and the priests chant their benedictions over us. Then, if you must go, let us go together to England to give away this inconvenient fortune. Or if I am unable to get leave of absence, at least you would be mine before you went."

Her eyes corrected him. "Am I not yours?" they asked, divining his trouble.

"Be mine actually, let us be one first—irrevocably," he begged.

"You know I could never leave you then," she faltered.

"But why do you care when or where we are married? Why not to-morrow? It is already celebrated in my soul!"

"Serge," she said steadily, and she was pale now, as she spoke, meaning the whole truth of the thing she said, "I have a contempt for the woman who is a coward in love, who counts the cost. If I were bound only by my duty to myself, if the safety of another was not depending upon me, I would be yours when and where you willed. I would not ask for a priest if God was with us. I would give you the supreme proof of my being lost to all save you. You might carry me off like any Cossack of old. If you ask it of me I will even——"

But his face was white to the lips, and he drew back as if even the touch of his uniform against her gown seemed profanation.

"My holy Madonna," he whispered, with bent head, "I believe it. I believe you capable of any heroism. But you must always remain radiant above me. It is enough. I am on my face in the dust, in humility before such words. Forgive me if I seemed to doubt you until they were necessary."

They parted solemnly, coldly; as two braves might on the eve of a desperate attack. But never had their storms of passion so united them as these few moments when they stood apart, the power of the sense dominated by the vision of the spirit.

She heard him pace the adjoining salon at intervals through the night, and knew he could not tear himself

from her threshold. A little before dawn he let himself quietly out, and went off to his early drill with the orderly precision of the soldier, who cannot permit himself the luxury of his personal life, except in the hours "off duty" in the business of his Emperor.

The train Sir James had chosen left at seven in the morning. He was startled by the white face and icy hands of his niece, and half expected her to demand grace on the plea of illness; but no appeal was made. Serge was at the station on time; the first instance of such punctuality during their acquaintance. He made no moan, indeed he had been taking coffee at the buffet as he waited for them. His head was unbowed. In response to his sister and Mainwaring, who were ill at ease, he exchanged the compliments of the morning with his usual felicity of tongue. To all Nathalie's attempted asides he responded with graceful assent that refused to recognise his need of consolation. Sir James recognised the Spartan acquiescence to fate and a mind that estimated the intention of its adversary with a keenness that might prove unpleasant. So he made a point of keeping everything lively: his questions, greetings, and bustling preparations for departure affecting Nathalie as so many lashes laid across an open wound.

Catherine's tenderness was unfeigned, as with her usual calm demeanor she kissed her little "Americanski" for the last time. "Remember, dear one," she said with firm lips, "whatever purifies, fortifies." Her own concern was for her brother. She made no effort to conceal it. Nathalie knew that they all exaggerated the situation, yet assure herself as she might that the absence was only temporary, her instinct was for calamity. One glance at the face of Serge was enough to renew her terror of coming

evil. She felt she must scream aloud if he did not cease to include her in the ceremony of their departure. He had buried his own feeling out of sight in his aversion to revealing a holy thing to the profane, and not a trace of reproach or passion marred the desired effect. He was in action. She saw it and understood the military bearing he assumed. Uncle Jack alone supported her through the ordeal. He was going to Petersburg in a few days; meantime, he assured her, he would hang about, and write her hourly. He was on the loose, anyway—a few days more or less did not matter. In this fashion he took it upon himself to bridge over the chasm opening between the lovers, which gave Nathalie a sense of established connection, definitely adding to her security.

Serge stood at "attention," bareheaded, between Catherine and this self-appointed consoler, as the train moved away, but they all blurred and ran together in the confusion of her blinded sight. Oh, it was unbearable! She knew he would do his best to believe in her, but he was so ignorant of European women! And associating her, as he had, with his holiest ideal of the Mother of God, what was to become of him if his faith in her was shaken, if by chance alone appearances should make her seem untrue? Theirs was no mere marriage of convenience, influenced by policy and love of gain. The spirit of a poet and the heart of a child were his, as a fragrance belongs to its flower. To fail him might mean any desperate impulse on his part. Suicide in Russia is not exceptional, for causes that never incite to it abroad. Patient with her he might be. Patient without her, he would never be. She had no right to expect it. She was angry with herself for taking this journey to England so seriously. It was Serge, and Serge's attitude toward it, that was colouring

everything—Serge, who lent the persistent note of tragedy to a commonplace event. She still saw his face, as he gave the last military salute—handsome, haughty, externally gallant, only conventionally concerned. The fifteen forts that guard the town began to slip behind. When the golden dome of the cathedral was no longer visible, she shut her eyes to prolong the impression of his continuing presence. It was as if she went from him in her own familiar form, yet remained in that dearer form and saw herself depart—a mystery of love's duality. His solitude without her, and her suffering without him, wore equally upon her imagination, and but for the actual pain in her throat caused by suppressed sobs she might have been just awaking from some vivid dream, so swiftly, softly the joy of the last weeks faded away behind her as the train swept on.

She tried in vain to cheer herself by remembering how happily she should recognise every stage of the return route a fortnight later, but the last words of Serge haunted her over the frontier, and like tears made audible, she heard them asleep and awake—"Ah yes, Dushenka. I hear what you say, I understand. You think so—but you will be prevented. It is over."

He had not said "Da svidanya," but the more ominous, mournful "Prashchaite," hinting that the farewell might be forever.

CHAPTER XII

FATE PLAYS UP

NEITHER Sir James Blount nor the assiduous Watson could induce Nathalie to express any of their mutual satisfaction upon regaining the German soil at Alexandrowo. Her first smile was rather a wicked one, owing to her uncle's dissatisfaction with his first meal in Berlin. After the rare temptations offered him in Varsovie, the "kalbfleisch" left much to be desired on his epicurean part. It was gratifying to feel that if her own heart was dreary and forlorn, his appetite was unappeased.

"It is tasteless to do right; I quite agree with you," she said commiseratingly.

"There is a low flavour about veal, always," he replied gloomily, annoyed to have her notice his displeasure in the simple fare. He glanced at her untouched plate, then vented all his dislike of the menu before them upon her, saying with vehemence: "Do eat, Nathalie! Nothing is so vitiating to the best of appetites as to see a woman sit and mope over her dinner! Whatever you do, don't insist on being a martyr at the table! You came of your own accord, and by your own suggestion. I only yielded after long entreaty on your part. Your savage won't take to the Steppes in a fortnight! Try to remember that you owe a little something to me. Here, take some of this compote"—savagely dabbing it upon her plate—"nothing is worse for me than depression at the table. I dare say

you forget that a little consideration for some one besides yourself and that Tartar might not come amiss!" His complaining was so really humorous in face of her own grave preoccupation that she laughed aloud, laughed hysterically, and refused to explain the joke, which he laid to her "beastly American humour."

Upon their arrival in London the preliminaries were begun promptly, but Nathalie saw that they were preliminary to a series of procrastinating formalities. She chafed under each delay, and obstinately refused to allow her aunt's maid to unpack her trunks. Nor would she resume any of her former habits of English life or society. She was distinctly on a visit. It was disappointing to find Wanda gone, but she was glad Hilary was out of town and even Lord Gore for the moment in Paris. The devotion of either, just now, would have been as unwelcome as had she been in reality the wife of Serge. She distrusted her uncle, and her aunt's helpless reproaches teased her nerves.

She passed her first week between business interviews with the family solicitor and the purchasing of such additions to her wardrobe as might be calculated to heighten her charms in the adoring eyes of the one man in the world—rose-leaf *négligées*, filmy frocks of lace, mysterious chiffons, a collection of marvellous Paris hats for the enhancing of her beauty abroad, all selected to win his applause and enhance his subjection. She was glad now that every modiste who had chanced to fit her had justly raved over her figure, her "American figure," they called it, singing its perfection of line and curve. She was glad, too, of that soft abundance of hair, that nestled so naturally under the most extravagant brims of these ravishing chapeaux, to the enchantment of the salesladies in attend-

ance. Serge would be crazy over her in those hats! Oh beyond a doubt! He would kiss her—she shut her eyes for an instant—to exult in her probable effect upon him; heat lightning flying through her veins, reminiscent and anticipatory.

Her aunt, though appreciative of her finery, was discouraging in regard to its destined sacrifice.

"It all seems very unsuitable for that wild country!" she fretted. "Would not plainer things really be more appropriate, Nathalie? Wool things, for instance, and warm fleece-lined garments? Of course you will have your furs, but what do you want with these thin gowns and straw hats?"

"Why, my dear Aunt Netta, it is summer!" cried Nathalie.

"Of course it is in England," agreed her aunt dubiously, "but it is always sleighing in Russia, at least in all the pictures one sees representing Russia, and you never can wear these things in such a climate, even if it is summer on the calendar."

"It is not always winter, out of those pictures, any more than Washington is forever crossing the Delaware, as he is in your old engraving of him! Serge is not an Esquimaux. You are probably thinking of them."

"It is so queer of you, Nathalie," her aunt fretted on. "Your uncle is quite dreadfully upset, in spite of his perfectly calm manner externally. It is not really quite—nice of you, is it?" she ended lamely. They had discussed the subject too thoroughly before. She had no intention to reopen it with the vigorous young creature by her side.

"I shall try not to disgrace you, Aunt Netta," said Nathalie steadily. She was drawing a very long feather over her hair at a bewitchingly becoming curve.

"If all this trouble with you does not make your uncle ill," her aunt began anxiously.

Nathalie forbore to express her own sentiments in regard to Sir James' physical condition and its causes.

"I don't believe he will be ill—if Watson keeps a strict eye on his diet," she added.

"If you would only give up the idea of being married in Russia, it would be less shocking to him," continued Her Ladyship. "The Bishop would arrange it all. He would overlook the irregularity of the groom being a heathen, for Sir James' sake, I am sure. If it was a military wedding at St. Innocent's, it would seem to legitimatise the whole thing, to a certain extent. The Embassy would appear to lend an air of propriety, and it could be carried off as if it was regular, at least. Of course, even then it would be trying enough for your uncle and me, to say nothing of Hilary, but it would keep up appearances."

Nathalie listened patiently to the end.

"It is very sweet of you to offer to reinstate me in the public eye, by immolating the rest of the family," she said demurely. "But I shall never ask it of you. I suppose it would shock you to death if I told you how I feel about it," she said, becoming suddenly grave. "I feel as if I belonged to Serge already, so completely, so helplessly, that I should not care for any marriage pomps at all, except that he is such a *dévo*t that he would consent to do nothing without the full sanction and blessing of his church."

Lady Blount was more than shocked. She was speechless—which speaks much for any woman. She turned away, unwilling to allow the glance of an irreproachable

British matron to rest upon so bedeviled an object as her niece, as she coldly warned her of her fault.

"Never let any one else hear you make such a speech as that, Nathalie! It is unladylike in the extreme!" Lady Janet wanted to say ribald, but the word stuck in her throat. She substituted others less compromising to herself, as she went on. "It is radical, it is free-thinking, it is even—indelicate." She tried to conceal her embarrassment, as she concluded hastily: "Hilary must never know that you have entertained such loose ideas. I can't imagine where you got them! Unless that Russian revolutionist your uncle allowed you to visit put them in your head. I never approved of your friendship with her, a mere adventuress as far as any of us knew."

She opened her salts for support, and from a beaded bag at her side drew out a vial of tablets, and took one, ostentatiously, to quiet her aroused nervous organism.

"I am honest, at least," cried Nathalie, refusing to be overawed by the havoc she had made. "My marriage vows may sound bald, but they are true; as true as any hypocritical cortège that you have ever seen moving in and out of St. Innocent's every spring and autumn could make them! The stage setting may be more conventional there, but the mating of souls does not very often impress me as everlasting."

"It is wicked to call the church a stage setting, Nathalie. It shows how far you have sunk away from everything good, while you were in that outlandish country!"

Nathalie's colour rose a trifle. Her heart smouldered on. "Look at Lord Harwich and Elsie Dimond," she said, not permitting herself to be turned from her argument; "a notorious rake and a girl who had cried herself blind for another man! They were married as you sug-

gest. And Sir Everett Rennell and Sally Talbot, a mere business deal between a title and the money and heirs to carry it on. And Lady Evelyn Guinness and Colonel Walters, divorced within a year, and both married again! If that is a sample of St. Innocent's best, it is not good enough for me."

Lady Blount waved her aside wearily, sniffing her salts with aggravated persistence.

"Don't trouble to discuss it, Nathalie. It tries me beyond measure. My nerves are not equal to discussion. I wish you had more natural respect for the holy sacraments. It is strange to find vulgarity, and almost infidelity, in one's own family. It must be your mother's blood coming out in you. My brother never cherished an improper thought in his life."

"Yes, I dare say contradiction is wearing, and honesty improper—almost indecent," retorted Nathalie hotly. "But appearances do not satisfy me. I cannot live on the reflection of a semblance. I want realities, and thank God! I have got them, and I shall not let them go."

"You make it very hard for us," complained her aunt, as if the topic was exhausted. Nathalie stared at her as if she did not comprehend her words.

"I? Make it hard for you, Aunt Netta?" she asked, astonished. "Why, I thought you were making it horrid for me, and I was doing my prettiest to make life smooth for you!"

"Of course the way everything has been arranged is anything but suitable, or even creditable," began her aunt, realising that she had perhaps gone too far; to which her niece made no reply, beyond quietly leaving the room, carrying her hats away without the least syllable escaping

her, the quizzical smile still playing over the corner of her resolute crimson mouth.

"I do not despair," Lady Janet called after her, in a conciliatory voice, "he may be exiled to Siberia any day, and your uncle tells me that leaves even a wife free to marry again. It may all come round happily in the end."

Nathalie measured her coolly from the threshold before she hurled her counter shot.

"The Tsar crowns himself, Aunt Netta. Serge alone could uncrown himself in my eyes. If he goes to Siberia, you may look for me there, too."

Was there ever a more stubborn, infatuated, impossible person to bring to a reasonable point of view?

Her happiest hours in each of these first lagging days were those in which she wrote to Serge. They were letters to inflame the coldest faith. Her heart seemed to beat itself out upon the paper, and she imagined him raising the last words to his lips, in his gentle, passionate fashion. Slowly a week passed, and from him no message had come. If she had not been supported by her approaching return to him, she would have chafed even more sorely over her daily disappointment and growing anxiety. At the earnest representation of its importance, by her solicitors, she had conceded a few extra days for her stay. She regretted even this in the strangeness of the silence that appalled her. Uncle Jack had written twice, but the second letter had announced his departure for Petersburg immediately, in order to avail himself of the society of a friend who had unexpectedly turned up in Warsaw, bent on the same destination. To Petersburg also had Wanda's husband been recalled. On the afternoon of the seventh day, feeling she could no longer en-

dure the strain of not hearing directly from her lover, she started to the telegraph office herself, and met the postman on his afternoon round a few doors down the street. Stopping the carriage she beckoned to him. He glanced over the assortment of mail in his package and shook his head in response. But as he approached, to ring a bell nearer at hand, her eager eyes had caught the blue stamp of Russia and the precise, exquisite handwriting of Serge, on top of the pile of letters about to be delivered at her own door. She flew out of the victoria and took it from his hand, summarily dismissing the coachman. She could not dilute her joy by opening the dear thing out in the world, since "dreams exposed to the air sometimes fade." She would hold its perfume as the incense of her own inner sanctuary.

A hurdy-gurdy was playing a mad ragtime melody near by, and the sunshine was suddenly as gay as the refrain tossed out upon the air. She passed her uncle in the hall, in company with Mr. Leatherby, the solicitor, and flashed a brilliant smile at them. "Russian mail!" she cried, running upstairs to her own room and flinging the windows wide to the soft beauty of the early summer afternoon. It was well for the undimmed radiance of her mood that she had missed the glance exchanged by the discreet eyes of the two men who remained below. To be alone with his letter here—it was more intimate, closer than he could have been, had he been actually in London! Yet he was here. His letter had made him tangible, a bodily reality! Tearing open the envelope she saw at one devouring glance that it was not a letter after all. It was a poem of Lermontoff's Serge had promised to translate for her to the best of his ability. At the close were only a few words of his own;

"Did you forget already? I am one week alone to-day without a greeting from you.

"YOUR COSSACK."

He had not received her letters yet, then. She began counting on her fingers, as women will with a calendar doing it for them before their eyes. If a letter left London on Friday it would reach Warsaw on Tuesday morning, at best. If he answered at once, she ought to have received it.

Here she lost her reckoning, having forgotten to curl up her fingers as she counted. After several disappointing attempts to fix the dates that had intervened, she caught up the calendar to settle them more definitely.

She had written every day. Watson had mailed the letters—the first from Berlin. He must have received that letter the next day but one after it was sent. And her first letter from London must have reached him before this poem was posted by him to her. What did it mean? She hastily took her pen as if to write a long explanation, but she could not stop to write; she decided to wire. She would reassure him at once. He should not be kept in suspense by this hitch in their communications. She scribbled a message as fast as she could:

"Have written daily. Return postponed only a week.

"ASRA."

This last was their talisman, their supreme significant lover's code-word. She began to sing in a high key, the song of the Cossack:

"Cossack rides ever toward the North."

From the street below the hurdy-gurdy, now changing its tune, was wailing Manrico's song from the tower, stopping suddenly with a jerk in the midst of the

high chromatic, due to the exigency of "moving on," no doubt. She was too full of her own gladness to go out at once and mingle her joy with the confusion of the town. She paced up and down the room, as Serge might have done, singing and smiling, and stopping every time she passed his photograph, taken in full uniform, to adore him anew.

But to whom dared she entrust the dispatching of this cry of her heart across the intervening miles? No hand but her own should be honoured with so sacred a commission. It was not far to an hôtel where she had often sent her messages in preference to the crowded offices further away. To-day her choice proved fortunate, as the cost of her telegram to Russia was more than she supposed it would be and her little change purse turned traitor, producing only a silly shilling and a pin picked up on her way, for luck. The operator assured her, however, that the payment was of no importance and could be settled at any time, so she saw the actual written message spiked with a score of others awaiting their turn to come to life at the throb of the busy current continuously clicking before her. It was on the very next corner that she met Walton trotting along with a handfull of papers, his manner something between that of a bank official and a funeral director. To him she hastily explained the balance to be paid on her Russian telegram, approving the alacrity with which he left her to execute her order, and taking the precaution to watch him out of sight through the doors of the hôtel. After this there could be no faintest reason why her message should not be immediately flying on its happy way. In less than half an hour she was back in her own room again, at peace with her world.

Outside, the cabs and victorias sped up and down. It was the end of the season. Pall Mall was less fresh and ardent than in early June, but still a resource for the idlers of all classes. The air came in to Nathalie at her writing, over window boxes that had imperceptibly slipped from hyacinths and tupils to pink geraniums, the seasonless white daisy, blue myrtle and creeping vines; scentless, yet with a touch of sweetness and the faint smell of damp earth.

Downstairs, meantime, Sir James Blount and Mr. Leatherby were less gay.

"I suppose all the proper precautions have been taken, and due enquiry pursued as to this person's record and character?" said Mr. Leatherby, looking up from his documents to Sir James, who was sitting on the opposite side of the great library desk, unmoved by the beguiling beauty of the day outside.

"Hum—as to that, just what enquiry?" asked Sir James Blount in turn.

"As to the facts of his military career, primarily. There might be a loophole——"

"Unblemished, unfortunately," said Sir James sulkily.

"That is unfortunate. But his—er—private life—exemplary also, I assume? Yes?"

These two grey-haired men turned and looked hard at each other, as if by a common impulse. Neither spoke, until the solicitor remarked indifferently:

"An obstacle might be found, or made to appear above the surface——"

"Very little hope of it," snapped Sir James.

"But this woman he refused to fire on—no reason existing? One can fancy——"

"A peasant girl!" sneeringly.

"But reputed handsome; I think you said handsome? Among officers one has not so far to go as one fears—at least in the army abroad; one finds laxities one hardly suspected," suggested Leatherby cautiously. He was feeling his way now. "There was also a shadow, of a financial nature, was there not? This money suddenly spent on a nameless friend, whose wife died in his absence; it might be made to appear to disadvantage, from which we are bound to save your niece in time." Sir James started uneasily. "I only said it might be made to appear." The lawyer was hedging now.

"Yes, dam'me, it might! Mightn't it?" agreed Sir James. It is working at arm's length and in a hurry, too. Nobody knows what this letter she got to-day may have in it to overturn all we have accomplished thus far.

"True, but we gain time, and that is good as far as it goes; only as far as it goes, however, Sir James." After a brief pause: "Your son realises his opportunity, I dare say?"

"Hilary is very unsatisfactory in regard to the whole matter," said his father, aggrieved. "He considers the season over with the Ascot, and has gone out of town, cut the whole thing, and washed his hands of it all, to my face, leaving his old father to save his future for him. It is damned ungentlemanly in Hilary, I say! The girl is not smirched by her whim for a Tartar, and Hilary is not one to be afraid of getting the bloom rubbed off, particularly."

"It shows a rather nice feeling, after all, doesn't it?" said Leatherby in extenuation. "It is rather a nasty gate for Hilary to take."

"Well, what if it is? No need to lie down at a ditch, is there?" demanded Sir James angrily.

After another pause the solicitor asked, in confirmation of his own theory: "Your motive in bringing Miss Mainwaring to England was, at bottom, to gain time in breaking off an undesirable match, more than to carry out the financial plan she herself proposed?"

"My wishes were understood to be that her fortune remained in the family through her marriage with my son," assented Sir James, somewhat haughtily.

Another pause; after which the solicitor was again ready with his suggestion. "There is no one in Warsaw at present on whose reliability in our cause we could safely rely?"

Sir James looked dubious. Mainwaring was out of the question, even had he remained. "Only the Consul," he admitted finally. "He was very pronounced in his opposition to the match, and damned interfering I call it, too! He sent a letter to Nathalie, giving her points on Russian marriage laws; got her angry, and his letter back with my lady's compliments!" Sir James' mouth twitched delightedly. "'Pon my word, it did me good to have that upstart commoner put in his place! If he was an Englishman, what business was it of his to inform the niece of Sir James Blount?"

"It was certainly ill-advised on his part," agreed Leatherby deferentially, "still he might be all the more assistance to us now in consequence," he suggested hopefully. "It is about our only chance."

"In which opinion we do not coincide," remarked Sir James.

"The opinion of an untrained mind, however valuable, I should not expect to concur with that of the legal conclusion," said Leatherby without offence. "You are aware as well as I that there must be a pretext found to prevent

your niece from disposing of her inheritance as she proposes. It would make no end of a scandal if you were known to have sold your guardianship for her fortune. To put it baldly, that is what it comes to. The external legalities must be protected for your own sake."

"Isn't it your business to keep the law dragging until something occurs to change her mind?" queried Sir James.

"The law will drag without my assistance, in spite of my efforts to prevent it," Leatherby promised readily. "But meantime we must act. There are two steps to be taken. First, damaging evidence must be brought against this Cossack to break off their relation at once, and second, she must marry your son to keep the fortune in the family in a natural way."

"Since we agreed to it, what is to hinder?" grumbled Sir James.

"Only that Miss Mainwaring has delivered her ultimatum. She goes on Tuesday week; consent or no consent."

"Preposterous!" from Sir James.

"No, American," corrected Leatherby. "They are all like that, resolute and sharp at a bargain."

"If she marries against my wishes," began Sir James threateningly.

"Well, suppose she does, what does she lose? To put it flatly, nothing! And your son, on the contrary, loses her very unheard-of generosity to him, in reparation for the loss of her very desirable self, which she was in no way committed by any obligation, legal or moral, to award him."

"It is a sufficiently nasty situation. You need not try to make it sound any worse than it is," said Sir James.

"After all her aunt and I have done for the girl, too—and Hilary just the man fitted to make her happy—a good husband—and all that sort of thing," he amended hastily, seeing a lack of perfect accord in the drawn eyebrows of the solicitor.

"We won't be drawn into doing anything unpremeditated, anything likely to bring unpleasant consequences to the light," said Leatherby guardedly. "We will simply await further developments. With your approval I will make some slight investigations through this English Consul you mention."

"In a week?" Sir James was all incredulity.

"In a week," assented Leatherby. "Fate may play up, Sir James, as it has before. If it does not place the game in your hands I advise you to let me finish these papers as I have suggested, unless you wish to miss both your birds—your niece and your son's future."

They talked on at great length, until Sir James Blount, convinced of the unsatisfactoriness of all young people, and the awkwardness of his own present predicament, allowed himself to be committed to a passive course he would have sworn himself a month ago to have regarded as inconsistent with fair play.

"We cannot act without legal precedent," Leatherby assured him over and over. "Our reputations would suffer. We can, however, present facts in compromising lights, conducive to ultimate satisfaction of all parties."

"Lie to her, you mean?" the virtue of righteousness rampant in Sir James at the mere prevarication of legal verbiage.

"We are not deceiving her, we are simply allowing her to deceive herself," was the quick rejoinder. "That is the accepted text of the Catholic economy, Sir James,

practised by minds trained to far holier professions than ours."

It was deeply dusk when, the discussion over, Leatherby took his departure, satisfied in the success achieved by the legal mind. If the end was not bound to justify the means, Sir James felt he should have an ugly score to settle with his own conscience later.

From the start he had stipulated to be kept in ignorance of the Solicitor's moves in the rather underhand game being conducted for the good of all concerned. And if the assurance of Leatherby's voice urging, "Leave it all to me, Sir James, all quite to me," did not entirely drown his compunction, at least it was a matter of no more than a week, until the English Consul at Warsaw would make his report.

So it happened that morning after morning Nathalie scanned the breakfast table for her letter in vain. There were letters in plenty by her plate, but never the letter she wanted, with the Russian postmark, the blue stamp and the delicate handwriting of Serge. None came. It hurt her pride almost as much as it made her heart ache. She had grown too conscious of his neglect to ask the servants if there were letters for her after the first delivery of the day, or to be seen hanging about the hall at the later delivery hours. She waited hour by hour, but no one ever knocked to deliver the longed for letter, after the postman's shrill whistle echoed along the street, though she always heard him admitted below. Once, standing by her open window, she heard him raising some mild objection over a registered letter.

"It must be signed by the lady to whom it is addressed; no one else will do," she understood him to say, but instantly Watson's voice answered with superiority,

"My Lady is asleep and cannot be disturbed. His Lordship will sign." She wondered why the postman said "Thank you" so impressively to Watson. After all, it was nothing to him, and there was no reason for a tip.

So it was for Aunt Janet, then. She bit her lips not to break down for the bitterness of her own disappointment. She had so hoped that it was hers. A letter might have meant the whole world set right to her! The suspense told on her colour and gave her face an unnatural, wistful lack of everything that had distinguished her charm.

"It is a shame! A damn shame!" Sir James exploded noisily, in reply to her outcry one morning, when mail after mail had brought no relief. "I never liked the fellow, you know, never gave my consent. I am not surprised at anything. Couldn't be true to a girl like you for a fortnight, eh? Well, it is a blessed escape that he showed his colours! A merciful slow-up in time to save a spill or a broken neck, I call it!"

But his niece found no consolation in her escape. "It is not his fault. I will not believe that for one instant, even if you do think he is tired of me," she reiterated stoutly.

"He is a Kazak, don't forget that! From Mazeppa down they despised marriage."

"That is all in the dead past," she said scornfully.

Sir James's manner changed. "Has he ever spoken to you about something that was not in the dead past—about the woman he supported just outside the city?"

The question was put as if a reluctant one. It met with no evasion.

"Catherine told me of a woman he kept from starving," she said; the fact had no personal importance to her beyond the virtue of the deed. "It sounds ridiculous to

say it, Uncle James, but this silence is conspiracy. Serge knows me. He could not be false to me any more than I could to him. Perhaps they are afraid I may draw him away from the army. They may be using all sorts of government intrigues to keep us apart. I must think it out carefully and decide what to do." She would not admit to him that it was being decided for her already, cruelly, mutely decided.

"Leatherby has an idea, but of course you would not listen to it, you are so beastly cocksure of yourself! He thinks the money matter may have cooled the match."

"He is at perfect liberty to think anything as low as his own mind dictates," she replied rudely. "Serge cares no more for money than I do. It does not count with him. He would never listen while I explained my affairs to him. He only thought about me."

"It looks deucedly as if he had changed his mind, then. How many letters have you had from him in two weeks?"

"One." She went so pale it frightened him as she said it.

"Don't give way to fancies, don't give way! Nothing a man dislikes so much as a scene!" He rang for Watson: "Bring Miss Mainwaring a glass of wine at once," he ordered sharply. "At once, Watson, she is indisposed; and, Watson, I say, bring me my malted milk at the same time."

Even in her own mental suffering it struck Nathalie that his conscience must be troubling him if he voluntarily ordered malted milk. For what was he doing this penance? For dragging her to England perhaps?

For an instant she all but won him over. A second consideration showed him the weakness of the impulse. She might find she had overestimated her feeling for this

Cossack—Leatherby thought it likely enough she would. She ought not to ride one stirrup—give the other foot a chance, at least! A firm hand and a steady curb and we'll get her by this! he promised himself. She will live to thank me for holding her in a bit over this foolishness. One bolt ruins a colt and a woman forever! I all but lost my nerve there for an instant, though, dam'me if I didn't!

On the very day Nathalie had intended for her positive return to Russia Mr. Leatherby came earlier than usual to Park Lane. She saw him ushered into the library and noted the suppressed exultation of his countenance as the great door swung behind him. Solomon Leatherby was a man who possessed a physiognomy. There might have even been more letters in that ungainly word fully to express his combination of features, and the results in facial effect he was bound, without effort on his part, to produce. As he shook hands this morning he was saying only, "Good-morning, Sir James! Fine morning! Wonderful weather, considering the lateness of the season!" but his physical presence was leaping and shouting beneath the iron control he was exerting upon his too revealing personality.

"You are earlier than usual, Leatherby," said Sir James blindly.

"A little news, not entirely unwelcome, is at fault, Sir; a little news from Russia by the first mail. A little bit of information that does not come altogether amiss, from the English Consul at Warsaw."

Sir James's face clouded.

"You have done nothing to arouse a hostile suspicion, I trust, Leatherby," he said hastily aloud.

Leatherby made a dissenting gesture with his two

hands that might have been intended as the British for a shrug. He admired this feint of regret on his patron's part. It was truly the blue blood showing through. This was patrician, this lack of curiosity in regard to information that bore acutely on his own prosperity. He waited for encouragement to begin.

"Well, what have you conjured up?" said Sir James, impatient at last.

"Fate, my dear Sir James, fate has played into your hands," replied the solicitor, drawing a chair nearer to the black oak desk, their silent accomplice, and sitting down deliberately without being asked. "You hold all the cards on the table. All the taking cards," he repeated with a smile that threatened to crack his wrinkled face.

"Proceed, Leatherby. Be good enough to drop hyperbole. This is a most trying matter to me. I love my niece, and anything detrimental to her happiness, caused by the object of her affections, however misplaced, must of necessity cut me very close. You will kindly be as explicit as possible and continue without jesting. I may say I am in no humour for jesting this morning after a sleepless night."

Mr. Leatherby bowed. "Exactly so," he agreed.

He took a letter from his inner pocket, opening it carefully, adjusting his glasses; then laying it down, said, speaking very low, as if the penetrating shadow of Watson might betray his secret:

"By advice of the English Consul at Warsaw I am in agreeable position of a bearer of good news, Sir James." He hesitated a moment, but one glance at his client's face warned him not to dally, and he almost whispered the rest: "The Cossack has disappeared!"

CHAPTER XIII

BY ADVICE OF THE CONSUL

A LETTER from Catherine received by Nathalie a few days after her arrival in London had announced her own probable departure with the Red Cross in a week's time. That had made the instant thought of appealing to her a vain hope. She was in all likelihood already on her way to the far East. Uncle Jack was in Moscow if his plans had been carried out. He had written her of the wonders of Petersburg cordiality with which the letters of introduction supplied by Serge and Catherine had been met. She had counted upon him to come to her aid in the absence of Catherine and to take care of her until Serge had the right. She was sure of him. Her last hope was resting upon him now, but he was far away and without a sign from her how was he to realise her need of him before the wedding day was actually announced. All her attempts to reach him were unavailing. He had told her to address him care of the Crédit Lyonnais, Moscow. This she had done, but again there was the waiting interval to be endured. She resolved not to be frightened or foolishly desperate over the turn affairs had taken. She bade herself remember that she was no princess in a tower. She encouraged herself by laughing at the notion that in London, at the dawn of the twentieth century, letters could be suppressed, or she herself secreted as some maiden of the dark ages in a forest-hidden castle behind a moated wall. Yet as the silence stretched its lengthening shadow about her, thwarted and helpless,

with no tidings from those she loved, Russia might have ceased to exist for all evidence she could get of its continued reality. She realised with a pang of astonishment how little she had known Serge, how entirely the wonder of him had disqualified her from judging him. She knew how utterly he had entered her inmost being, "where only God may go." She had believed him equally possessed by her own invading passion, yet she was sufficiently woman of the world to know that to every man there are many women in the world, but to every woman only one man. Her light moments of unsubstantial doubt he had dispelled without a word of self-justification. That he made no effort now paralysed her own force of will. How could she break through every opposing force to go to him if he would not ask her to come? "That is my mystery," she seemed to hear him say in reply to all her most torturing curiosity. Ah, yes, for the embodiment of the passionate moment, the æsthetic ritualist, there would be remorseless compensations beyond a doubt—but for her? What was there for her? She had character alone to cling to. That rugged ideal loomed grey beside the iridescent glamour of a dream. At last, after sleepless nights and unanswered appeals, for she had even humbled herself to write to the American Consul at Warsaw to ask if Serge was ill, she turned on Sir James Blount.

"You know what this means, Uncle James. You are keeping something from me. You are a man and I am, in a way, in your power, but I demand an explanation. If you refuse it to me I will go myself and find out what this silence is made of!"

She stood by the great library desk, with her sun-kissed hair, tilting her mutinous chin, her eyes bright from insomnia, without a hint of colour in her face, ex-

cept the feverish lips that trembled—a drawn lance against her unseen foe. The Nathalie who had stood on the balcony at Versailles and gloried in the passing of that Cossack regiment a month before was transformed to a thing of steel and daring. Slowly then, without a word, her uncle unlocked the treacherous black oak desk, and drawing out two letters with the familiar Russian postmark, handed them to her and abruptly left the room.

She saw that one was addressed to herself and had but just been delivered by the date on the postmark. It was the reply from the American Consul. The other bore the letterhead of the English Consulate and was addressed to Sir James, dated one day before. She flushed as she read the hateful name of the man who had presumed to interfere with her marriage once before. So he was the snake in the grass! She let her eyes run contemptuously over the page, ready to sneer at any attempt to discredit Serge.

It was a mere statement, she soon perceived, uncoloured by any personal feeling. The purport was untempered and final, though rumor posed as fact throughout. In reply to the honoured favour of Sir James Blount, relative to the present welfare and whereabouts of Colonel Serge Ivanevitch Arkharof, of the Baikal Cossack regiment then stationed at Warsaw, he regretted to be obliged to report in a manner so far from satisfactory. As far as could be ascertained, the facts were as follows: On the night of the preceding Sunday—Nathalie paused: that was the date when she had given her word to have already returned, and one week over—a champagne supper was offered at the Europäische Hof attended by some of the most brilliant of the Hussar officers and those from other regiments, including the One

Hundredth Cossacks. The officers sat on drinking late into the night or morning. Finally the bets began to circulate as to the capacity of each to drink without becoming intoxicated. They lapsed further and further from self-control, until it was decided to fight a mock duel for Klingska, a gipsy soubrette who, with others of her kind, had been introduced to sing and dance for their amusement. Becoming too noisy for the reputation of the house the proprietor, fearing a public scandal, forced his way into the private dining-room where the supper had been served, and demanded that the affray be broken up. Angered at the intrusion of one so distinctly their inferior, the crowd threw china and glass at his head, amid a broadside of imprecation. Some of it missed fire and fell against the long mirrors that reflected the orgy. It was a confusion of broken glass, wine and the débris of the table. The women, also under the influence of liquor, added to the disorder. One officer, apparently dead, lay with his head against the wall. Amid a babel of voices more or less intoxicated the police were hastily summoned, but dared not touch officers of such high rank, boasting such well-known and powerful connections. In short, they broke and brawled, and had their profligate debauch out to the end. At dawn, rather than meet dismissal and disgrace, remorseful, believing their prostrate companion dead, one shot himself, one attempted to run the frontier and was shot. Another was degraded by order of his commander. Several were dishonoured temporarily and sent into exile. Two or three sneaked away and have not been traced. It was not a political offence and occasioned little comment; the penalty in such cases being nominal, chiefly imposed for disregard of discipline in being out of barracks against the rules. The scandal

had been suppressed. Various reasons had been given for the transference, so called, of the officers involved. The proprietor of the hotel confessed himself unable to recall the faces of any of his guests, and as the bill was never demanded or rendered it was made in no one's name and the participants in the affray remained unknown. The few facts cited had been only obtainable through the courtesy of one of the police officials called upon the scene, who was glad to be of any service to the Consul in the matter, since he remembered Miss Mainwaring from a slight unpleasantness over her passport, through mutual misunderstanding.

After sundry unimportant observations of his own the Consul added in conclusion: "Three names are spoken. Several are hinted, others avoided. Of Colonel Serge Ivanevitch Arkharof it is impossible to obtain exact information. He has disappeared from Warsaw. His General professes ignorance of his hiding place. His leave of absence expired without explanation. It is unfortunately true that he was an intimate of the men positively known to have been involved, and a card of invitation from the Hussar who offered the entertainment and afterward shot himself was found at the quarters of the Cossack formerly a suitor for the hand of your niece, as well as a card of acceptance from him, in the pocket of the Hussar."

Of the perfunctory closing formalities Nathalie read no more. Condemning it as malicious hearsay, she tore the lying slander to shreds, and grasped the letter of her own friendly Consul as a life preserver after a threatened wreck. It was a kind letter, written by a man with no great love for Russia, but who shrank from hurting the girl whose lover had seemed to

betray her trust so vilely. He spared her all detail, only hinting of a recent tragic occurrence reported to have taken place the Sunday night previous, since when the whole city seemed on its guard and no word of the officers implicated was likely to escape the officials. Russia's methods were undoubtedly her own, and for an American, unassisted, no path to intelligence was more than a blind alley. The proprietor was uncommunicative. The servants had received their orders, of course, and been well paid to obey them. Though he had enlisted a few secret agents to help him in his sincere desire to set her mind at rest, only one thing was certain. The usual haunts of the Cossack officer knew him no more. This might mean a number of things having no bearing upon his personal affairs. From the lips of one incautious officer it had been reported the Serge Ivanevitch Arkharof had left his regiment. This might or might not be reliable, and it might only serve as a blind for some important secret mission upon which it had been convenient to send him. He confessed himself terribly sorry to fail her, but equally at loss as to how the mystery could be cleared up. He also added a few sentences as to the incomprehensibility of Russia and the Russians to the direct American understanding.

When she had finished reading she stood motionless, smitten to the heart. Every woman finds, in the depths of her love, forgiveness for sin, but what antidote for contempt? Thus, unguessed even by the assiduous English Consul, had the police official, dissembling well the motive of his zeal, paid his score against the Cossack officer, and avenged his mistress, the blonde girl shot down at Wyszogrod in the peasant uprising of the early summer.

To the benumbed being who had been Nathalie, now pitilessly convinced of her lover's baseness, no one memory remained in defence of her dream. Hope and fear had slain each other and she was alone, staring at her life. Already she conceived for Serge something of the instinctive repulsion one has for a dead body, unloved. The vulgarity of it all, the horror, the brutality, made him seem the creature of another world. This then had been his true nature, concealed beneath the mask of his gentle refinement. She accused him of many evil traits as she stood with her hands clenched and her eyes set, blind to the appeal of the summer beauty outside. She had never counted the cost of throwing over every worldly consideration for him and he had disgraced her by a public *esclandre* of vicious notoriety, followed by a cowardly desertion of consequences. He had run away and left others, herself included, to bear the inevitable blow alone. Pride strong as death supported her now. As he had chosen, so it should be. It was over between her heart and the love of men forever! There should be no signal of surrender to life; but truce with love she would never make on any terms. She had youth, beauty and the power that fortune gives at her command. If Serge had been true to her, she would have used it all to find her way to him. How she would have laughed down all the barriers raised to prevent her! She would with her own hand have torn away this veil of silence, this muffling mystery rising between them like a deadly tide that would not turn. Whatever sham had been erected to keep them apart she would have thrown down. But if he had dishonoured their love, if her ideal of him was but a ghost of her own pure creation, a sentimental passion hovering about a brilliant presence, with nothing

of permanent reality save her own faith in it, the sooner the dream was broken and the drugged heart aroused the better. To cherish the past, to hope against hope—ah, madness led that way and shame!

With this resolve she lifted her shining head and drew herself up to her pathetically unheroic height with a touching instinct to take the orders as became a soldier; her impulse true to the old allegiance reason had justly forsworn. She remembered the laconic dialogue of Napoleon with his veteran: "Are you wounded?" and the man's reply, "Killed, Sire." The case seemed her own. Without making the least noise she slipped from the room where her life had fallen, carrying it off the field for dead. In her own room behind locked doors she could accustom herself to being a ghost, a mere shade that flitted where the living girl had walked and sung. There unseen she might disentangle herself from all that had been real only an hour ago and determine her attitude toward the next event.

At twilight Sir James Blount entered his lady's shaded apartment under pretence of general solicitude for her condition of health, but really to demand information of Nathalie's whereabouts and present occupation.

"You have not seen her go out, have you?" he asked casually.

"You know, James, I never keep any track of Nathalie's movements. I am not strong enough to follow her about, even mentally," remonstrated Lady Janet.

"Fact is," he said, taking the leap all at once without troubling himself to warn her to be calm, "Nathalie is by way of getting a bad shake-up this afternoon."

"If you are going to talk about disagreeable things please wait until morning," begged his lady feebly.

"You know I never can bear disagreeable discussions after the luncheon hour. It is likely to give me a sleepless night."

"It is not likely to be the only sleepless night under this roof! Dam'me if it is!" cried Sir James.

Lady Blount looked at him sternly. She did not reprimand him, that had been proved unwise; but she tried evading the issue by saying, "It is just tea time, James, not the hour for any trying disclosures. Please be so good as to ring, if you don't mind. We can speak of whatever you refer to to-morrow."

Lady Janet was one of the women who cherish their nerves and their relatively exaggerated states. She always saved herself unpleasant excitement, and often since entering the family it had impressed Nathalie as impossible to conceive of any crisis when one might not be asked to ring for tea or some other mild restorative. Creature comfort outweighing the impending plague, pestilence or a broken heart, it was Lady Janet's way to ignore the tragedy and occupy the victim by ministering to her own minor solace. Sir James had this in mind as he crossed the room obedient to her request. But with his hand on the bell he ominously paused.

"You would drink your tea at the usual time, I fancy, if Nathalie were dead!" he said viciously.

"If she has been thrown," remarked his lady pertinently, "why don't you have in a physician? Why do you come to me about it? You know how worse than useless I am in such emergencies, James."

"She is your dead brother's only child, and she is down. It was a nasty blow, too, poor girl!" he continued.

"Why do you try to set my nerves all on edge over a

mere tumble from a horse? What was she riding and why did you allow it?" persisted Lady Janet sharply.

"I dare say a woman could help her a bit, get her on her feet better than a man," said Sir James, passing over her mistake. "You might dose your nerves for once by seeing some one else face real suffering, Janet. Have your tea if you can get it down after you see Nathalie, but at least send for her to take it with you and be a little decent to her."

"How you do exaggerate, James! You came near giving me quite a fright. Nathalie is strong and vigorous. Nothing affects her seriously; she is so little sensitive—just like her poor mother!"

"She shall be sent for at once!" commanded Sir James, ringing imperatively. "I gave her some damnably bad news two hours ago and the library door has not opened since, as far as I know. She may have fainted or done any other preposterous thing all alone in there. I won't have such theatricals in my establishment. She shall be sent for at once!" and it was in fact Sir James who dispatched the maid on her errand to the library. No dialogue ensued between the waiting pair. Jackson returned from the library alone.

"There is no one in the library, My Lady," she reported. Sir James would not speak before a servant, but within his own breast his worst fears seemed confirmed.

It was Lady Janet who, still failing to see anything unusual in the case, sent Jackson up to Nathalie's own room on the next floor. As the maid disappeared Sir James gave an audible groan.

"You see now, Janet! You see, I hope! You are satisfied with the result of introducing an untamed American into the bosom of an hitherto respectable Eng-

lish family. The girl is not content with running mad after a Tartar, but now she needs must go and make a mess of his providentially jilting her!"

"Drink your tea; it will soothe you. I feel quite unequal to another word!" said Lady Janet, pushing a cup across the table toward him as she spoke.

"Damn the tea! One half expects to find her in the Thames! One hardly sees how one can sustain such a blot on the domestic record. One revolts so from the police and coroners and all that sort of thing! It might do in the lower classes—" His outburst was silenced by the return of Jackson, consequential, but under no vulgar excitement.

Lady Janet realised that if Nathalie was unhappy she might begin to understand her vaguely and her nerves. The future mingling of tears and tea was not remote from her mental contingency. She lifted a permitting gaze upon Jackson, who thus encouraged to speak, said glibly:

"Miss Mainwaring is sorry, My Lady, but she is unable to come down just at present. She said she would look in a little later, if agreeable."

A sigh broke from Sir James, carrying with it his haunting horror of police and coroner. Moping, no doubt, thought Lady Janet; ah, Nathalie will find out what tyrannical nerves are now! But aloud she asked guardedly:

"Miss Mainwaring did not speak of a headache? Did you notice if she was lying down? Her uncle thought she was not looking quite well earlier in the day."

Jackson brightened up immediately.

"Oh no, My Lady, Miss Mainwaring looked as usual, even more than usual, if anything. She was engaged

with the hair-dresser she sent Wallingford out to bring in. She is having her hair dressed with a gold fillet, in the new style. She is dining out to-night and wearing a Grecian dress that has just been sent home from Cottrells'. She said to tell Your Ladyship she would come and exhibit herself on her way to the carriage."

The glance Lady Janet lifted on Sir James was one of vindicated triumph. He declined to meet it, being a man.

"Very sensible of her! Deucedly sensible of her! One does admire good sense in a woman, if one lives to find it; dam'me if one doesn't!" he exclaimed, forgetting Jackson in the sense of being saved from police proceedings, as he quitted the room without delay.

"Is it any wonder my nerves are shattered?" said Lady Janet Blount appealingly to Jackson as the door shivered behind him, from the swing he had given it as he threw it together; to which the well-trained Jackson replied, "It is a miracle how the ladies do have to put up with the gentlemen, My Lady, especially in high society. We often remark, Mr. Watson and myself, how, with the grand way of Sir James Blount at times, there is occasion for giving away to the nerves, even in our station. As I have taken the liberty to remark to Mr. Watson, men are all alike, high and low, which he always denies the same, being sure there is no one like Sir James Blount. And indeed it is not a man like Mr. Watson one will be finding every day, which I ought to know, it going on twelve years now that we have held service in the same house before we made so free as to mention the human peculiarities only seen by eyes above stairs, My Lady!"

CHAPTER XIV

OFF FOR SIBERIA

MEANTIME the failure of Nathalie to return or explain her desertion was already assuming the proportions of tragedy at Warsaw. Statistics of suicide have long since ceased to create a ripple of astonishment in Russia, that being a favourite method of exit among the officers of conspicuous regiments. Catherine watched her brother day by day, praying passionately for his safety from himself. In this enforced waiting to be assured of his restored equilibrium she had lost the regimental train, close followed by the one in which the Red Cross and such other women of the regiment as desired were being hurriedly forwarded to the front. The sacrifice had been a heavy one for her. Journeying for days over that arduous three thousand miles and more in company with men who revered her, whose officers called her with familiar affection "Little Mother," and who could beguile tedious delays and monotony with reminiscence of her husband, would have been far less of a trial of strength and purpose. The association with other women like herself, devoting their lives to the wounded and dying soldiers, would have provided an opiate in which she might forget herself and the wrench of leaving those she so faithfully loved. That she made no least effort to depart after the unhappiness of Serge settled down upon them, spoke touchingly of the profoundly noble heart that was ready to sacrifice even so stern a duty of her own soul to the need of her brother. It was to her sweet

courage that his few hours of calm were due when effort after effort to communicate with Nathalie ended in failure. If Catherine doubted the girl she kept her misgivings to herself and encouraged him unflinchingly until he ceased to speak of his baffled attempts. The Russian says, "If God wants to punish a man He will take his pride." The pride of the Cossack refused to spy or seek assistance where it was so easily to be found, through his English Embassy. Self-respect forbade. Catherine winced for him in anticipation of the time when the secret could no longer prey upon them in silence, when the regiment, the world, should all be aware. Sympathy and raillery would be alike intolerable to him. He had gaily boasted himself to be a man of iron in his gallant days of golden notoriety. Would he prove it now, or would he be crushed by this ignominious retreat of fickle fortune? When Catherine felt unjustified in longer delay for personal considerations it was her insistence that won him to accompany her as far as Moscow; asking herself for his leave of absence and winning it half asked, since who could ever refuse Catherine Ivanovna a favour great or small? Serge accepted the suggestion without reluctance. It had begun to be apparent that his own regiment would not be needed until later; as if guarding this peaceful summer frontier was indefinitely to remain his duty. This galled the desperately wounded soul of the Cossack almost as bitterly as his love's desertion. In the abject despair of his first loneliness, however brilliantly concealed, the ennui of his mechanically repeated service drove him to gratitude for the un hoped-for diversion granted him for the sake of Madame la Generale. At least on the way to Moscow he should see nothing to make him remember Nathalie.

For a brief period he should be immune from association. And more than all, Moscow is to the real Russian little less than Paradise to the saints.

He was very silent during the journey. Catherine's heart yearned over him and ached for the necessity of leaving him. It hurt her that in the supreme desire of his life he should be denied. All his life she had indulged him. Joy had meant so much to him! He was so pitifully unprepared to love in vain! But at every attempt at consolation or gentle questioning she obtained always the inevitable answer of the Russian:

"Nitché wo" (it is nothing), "Catherine moya."

Thus repulsed, she strove to divert his imagination. She even sang over to him softly the airs of childhood, and still the shadow never lifted from his face, though it was sweet and unfrowning, and the set of the head upon the shoulders unflinching before the blow it had received between the great dark eyes, that sometimes stared as if they had lost their sight of all but inward visions.

But was he not a man, a soldier? And to the General's loyal widow, for what calamity was that fact alone not sufficient to inspire courage?

It was as they were drinking together one of their innumerable cups of tea, on the first afternoon, that she noticed the line of trouble cutting deep in his smooth white brow, the first marking left by the chariot wheels of time that had hitherto raced so lightly there.

"Dorogoi moya," she whispered, pressing close to his side, her eyes brimming, "learn from thy country to wait. She will return to thee."

He shook his head impatiently, but his lips trembled suddenly, so that they with difficulty held his cigarette,

and it would have fallen had he not taken the precaution to remove it.

Poor baby! His misery smote her. She had never denied him anything. He was one of the happy mortals who always stirred every one to serve and please him. She waited now to gather him to her breast, to rock and soothe him as she had when as a young girl he, the baby brother, had fled to her with a broken toy or a broken head. No eyes but those of a loving, maternal-natured woman would have read this broken heart to-day, in regarding the erect and decorated officer who sat with shoulders squared, every accoutrement of war shining, and his sword nestling to his side, more appropriately a part of his being than any wife could every truly seem. Seeing him outwardly untarnished she tried to rouse him through his patriotism, his most sacred pride.

"Remember," she challenged, "no prayer to God or service to the government is ever lost. Thou wilt be coming out soon to me, and what an opportunity, little brother! At least if sorrow overtakes thee, thou art not left in darkness, for always the light of glory shines above us, and for thee the gate of heroism stands always open. Thy country calls! And in her hour of need who is so cowardly, so base, as to remember private ills?"

In vain she searched his eyes for response to her admonishment, as he spoke so wearily, "Catherine moya, you are a woman, Slava Bohu! (glory to God!). You cannot understand the nature of a man. You do not comprehend the suffering or the resolve within my soul. For you the love is lived and dead. You can talk of patriotism and glory. For me there is death only on all sides. I think even the bell of Ivan Veliky powerless to rouse

me now. The dead do not hear even the voice of fame. We who have not love are dead. Do not disturb me in my tomb, my sister!"

He had not used the affectionate form of thou in his absorption, had not even noticed his neglect. By patriotism, by fame, by stern duty she continued to adjure him in vain. At last in sheer weariness she urged blind hope.

"Your star is not set," she cried bravely. "It will still guide you, Serge. You were born for a future. Be brave, be confident!" she begged.

"My star is set in the first redness of the morning," he persisted. Nor could she dispel the melancholy lethargy by any picture of his future she could devise.

"Forget the present, dream only of the future, live for it!" was her entreaty.

"The present is now and here," he reminded her. Then seeing that there was no other lure by which to win him to confidence or the comfort of speech, she spoke of Nathalie again.

"She will come back, Serge. But will she find you the same? Women have loved you easily, little brother, in the past. Nor have you always been blind." She thought only to provoke his *amour propre*, to put him on his mettle by recalling his earlier conquests, but he gave her a strange glance of comprehension, and she realised that instead of giving him consolation she had aroused a new element in his breast, or a new confusion. For the first time, perhaps, he feared his own passionate nature and its imperious demands. He had recoiled at the abominable possibility that he, not Nathalie, should raise the impassable barrier between their souls by some lightly welcomed transient pleasure. For Serge had

taken his pleasures lightly. A child of the 'coulisse,' many of his best stories had come to him over a wine-glass, much of his knowledge of life through the blue rings of tobacco smoke, for he was a frequenter of café and theatre, as were the others of his rank and class. He had drank and played, and even kissed perhaps, at large. But love, the ideal, the mysterious, the fire from the gods, had struck a note in his nature as deep as the reverberant chord in his sister's own. Until he met Nathalie, loved, in the true sense of the word, he had not. It had come to him as something more hallowed than the mass, more ever-present than the talisman he wore about his neck, more saving than the holy Ikons, more protecting than the holy water which he had been taught to believe could avert all disaster. The mystic and sensualist in him were both enthralled and appeased.

Catherine perceived instantly, and regretted, that she had given him this distrust of himself and his consecration to his ideal. Had she not unintentionally robbed him of love's strongest armour, shown him the weakest place in the chain, by suggesting its vulnerability? Softly, as if to herself, she began to recite the poem of Lermontoff to his dagger. He did not heed her until she came to the concluding pledge:

"Like thee, like thee,—I will be true as steel, my iron friend!"

Although his voice did not join her own, his face assumed a different expression, more spiritual, less stoical. The lines deepened until they seemed engraved upon his brow from concentration of will, not under the blow of fate from which he was unable to protect himself. She noticed that the hand resting upon his sword clenched till the pain acted as a sharp restorative to his entire

nature. Rejoicing in the symptom, although so slight, her rich voice continued.

"You must know, Serge, beloved, Slavyni moya, the English are not of your own race. They will not take the love left cool from the pursuit of others. They are not submissive. They do not think of men as their masters, their conquerors. They have not been accustomed to live on far estates, thousands of versts from great cities, and thankful to any man who gives them an opportunity for love, and most of all for maternity. One indiscretion, for them, is enough. After this hateful darkness, at present enshrouding Nathalie and you, is cleared away, if you want her for your wife, you must live not only as a soldier, but as a monk, that in the interval until she comes to you no offence may be whispered against you. No discredit will escape observation of the jealous English Consul, no offence but will be made a thousand-fold more serious, in order to keep you from her, and her from you. But I do not warn you for this alone. It is not for this world alone I would have you perfect for each other, but in the world to come. Keep thyself pure for her, as for the Madonna, gliding into the intimate speech of her heart with the intensified stress of her sincerity. "If thou hast been light with others, she will perceive it by her love for thee. Be warned, little brother. Be discreet, serve her faithfully, for my heart is a woman's heart, and it tells me she will come, or she will call thee to her! Be it in this world, or in the better one of eternal joy!"

"Amen," he murmured, as he reached to kiss her hand.

Catherine's eyes were lifted as in exaltation. She continued rapidly: "She will need thee to complete her, as thou wilt need her to fulfil the design of heaven, as the

beloved Dimitri was made one with my soul, in our angel who was too pure for earth, and taken from us transfigured. Save thyself for her in all perfection! Give her thyself, a man untouched, untainted. Lose your divine innocence together, as two souls in paradise might be made one for eternity!"

As she spoke, it seemed reasonable, this dream of their union. He listened, seduced by her eloquence, but led astray from her spiritual symbols, wedded already on earth in his hot imagination and desire. He closed his eyes and half dreamed, half swooned, drawing his love to him, kissing her hair, then passing deeper within the sanctuary of his passionate longing to the dream of their actual wedding night——

It was hideous to be recalled by the stopping of the train. To find himself in the close-smelling travelling coach, alone with his sister; the débris of travel and the odour of smoke and food asserting their ugly reality. Arrived at their destination, he hardly noticed the familiar features of the Gare de Smolensk, as they were swept along with the chattering throng, hurrying away to happiness or duty. It was Catherine's little sigh of recognition that suggested his surroundings to him as their cab dashed under the Arc de Triomphe.

It was mid-afternoon and the Siberian express did not leave until evening. Catherine was driven about on a varied pilgrimage of love and piety amid streets thronged with a more cosmopolitan population than any in the world. Every nationality and costume mingled there. Insensibly Serge was aroused by the animation of the brilliant scene. The moujik with his sweeping beard jostled the merchant in his fur bonnet. The Tatar, the Kalmyk, the Tscherkes drew his thoughts far

away to the Steppes, the Caucas, the wilderness of mountain peak and buried gorge, while the Turk and Greek dotted the foreground with their crimson fez. Excited by the dazzling vision of the Kremlin once more, he cried:

"The Kremlin is the only thing beyond Moscow! And beyond Moscow there is only heaven!"—as innumerable Russians have cried before, and will cry until the end of the end!

They drove first of all to the Cathedral of the Annunziata, which he entered with Catherine, to bow before the Virgin of the Don, according to Cossack precedent. Here they saw Krasemskin in the distance, paying his reverence to the same holy figure, no doubt. At the church of the Protection of the Virgin, Serge remained outside, while the afternoon sun touched the gleaming crosses that Ivan Vaselowitsch had restored upon the crescents raised by the victorious Turk above every cathedral once upon a bloody time. Here the fruit vendors were acting a little comedy of their own, offering their fine pears and the little purple and green grapes fresh from the Crimea, calling attention to their wares and pretending to eat them, as if tempted beyond their power to resist such luscious delights.

At the Church of St. Basil the Beatified, at the end of the Red Square, he again entered with her, as it was the anniversary of her marriage, and on that day of dear association it was her custom to celebrate a *molében*, a devotion due to birthdays and sacred anniversaries, in the Russian church. To-day, as the priest read on, the prayers were said, and the singing and burning of incense continued, Serge was bowing and crossing himself, making the inclinations and reverences, at the dictation

of holy instruction, rather than from a responsive spirit. The sweet and plaintive chant, "Gospardi, Gospardi, pamilur!"—Lord, Lord, have mercy upon us—at first came to his ears with small comfort. The prayers of the actual *molében* were directed not to God, but to the guardian angel of the departed. The Greek Church denies that it adores either Saint or Virgin, but considers it only modest to implore their intercession with the Almighty, and the prayers of St. Basil have power to release souls from purgatory and fallen angels from hell. Before the holy pictures the eternally burning lamps and candles of the faithful threw their wistful beams. Serge followed their straying radiance over the gilt of the pictures, often encrusted with jewels, over the malachite and lapis lazuli and antique enamels; but though he struggled to lift his own soul to the Almighty, Unseen, and All-powerful, always the human cry of a man's heart for that of a living woman drew him back to earth. His pinions were weighted. He could not pray beyond a mechanical repetition of the old prayers that promised relief to the most ignorant and the most aristocratic alike.

"Jesus, save me; Christ, have mercy on me; Holy Mary, Mother of God, intercede for me!"

It was promised to assure peace if repeated the required number of times. It could not fail. He began, but lost his reckoning and went vaguely on and on.

Catherine, seeing him lost in his devotions, waited gratefully without disturbing him, but at last was forced to remind him of the passing hours. When his sister had again entered the carriage and he was about to seat himself beside her, his glance was arrested by the approach of a familiar figure. It was Klopfsky, the most

fêted violinist of the hour, a man who had passed from the starvation garret of the true artist to the pinnacle of momentary furor. He was dressed in Parisian perfection, even to the gardenia in his coat, and did not see Serge until the latter, stepping back, stood directly before him as he also left the cathedral, where, no doubt, he had been praying for the repose of his poor wife, who literally died in want before the hour of his fame had struck. The meeting was enthusiastic. After the first eager questions on both sides the musician said with emotion he made no attempt to conceal:

"We could never forget your mercy to us, Serge Ivanevitch. I am sure she prays for you above."

"You speak of something I did not know, or have forgotten," said Serge, wishing to erase the painful past from the mind of his friend.

"Ahk! It is like your generous nature!" exclaimed Klopfsky. "But I can never forget that it was your gold that kept that suffering angel I loved so helplessly in the bare necessities, and even luxury, at the last!"

"Nitché wo, Nitché wo. Why distress yourself? It is in the past," Serge repeated.

"Ahk! Who but one's own blood would have done as you did? Allowed his own works of art, his very furniture, even his objets de luxe, to be sold for the sake of a mere unfortunate acquaintance?"

"The need was yours," said Serge simply. "I was happy without white books and ebony fauteuille. I could not look at inlaid cabinets of bric-à-brac and remember in comfort that a woman was cold—and that woman the wife of a great artist. Nitché wo. Let us speak no further of it."

"But now," said the artist pressingly, "now it is my

turn. If I could ever be of service to you"—he signed his unlimited desire. "At least, if I play in cities where you are, always consider my loge at your disposition and that of your friends."

Serge shrugged, as if to cast all further conversation of the past behind them forever, but suddenly, as if recollecting something and forming a hasty intention.

"There is one favour," he began, "a very great favour——"

"Certainly, certainly——" the artist assured him, without waiting to learn what it might be.

"It is a peculiar favour, and one that I hope may not cause you embarrassment. If I ask you, it is because——" Serge looked in his friend's face with a smile, as if not so sure of being understood.

"Nitché wo," said the artist in turn, but inwardly dreading lest it was a return of the large sum Serge had raised for him a year ago at much loss, with interest at the usual fabulous rate. "That is, if it is in my power," he added more cautiously.

"It is only a matter of gratifying my phantasy," said Serge, still smiling.

"Phantasy, yes, that was always your nature, Serge Ivanevitch! Imaginative, living in dreams! But tell me what you wish, for already your sister is wearied of our delaying her here."

"It is only this, when you play in London, play the Night of Rubinstein. Do it for me."

"I swear it!" cried Klopfsky, much relieved at the turn the request had taken. "And I will not even ask you why. It is a romance, I am sure, Prince Caprice."

"There is living now in London one woman who plays

it with almost the same understanding as yourself," said Serge simply. "I have told her of you. She will understand that it was I who commanded you."

"It may not be before another spring," said Klopfsky doubtfully. "The war influences all professional engagements. Even at court my dates are not fixed definitely. But when I go, surely, yes, I will play it as the call of purest passion. But will she hear me?"

"Be sure of it," said Serge gravely.

"Then it is settled. I will play it at every concert," said the artist, well satisfied.

"Thank you," said Serge, "and it is then also settled, all our transaction which you have recalled to me. It is all repaid with golden usury if you will carry this cry of the soul to another soul for me!"

"You are a great actor, Serge Ivanevitch! Your place should be behind the twinkling footlights! You play the rôle of lover as no one of the court actors! If the army had not thrown for you and won from Fate I am sure the stage would have been your triumph."

"The army threw first—yet what is life but a stage, as the English Shakespeare asked? But I must go, I must not longer keep my sister waiting."

Again they embraced in Russian fashion, and once more Serge entered the carriage; but for some strange reason his heart was lighter. He puzzled over the question why this chance encounter and its remote hope of a connection with Nathalie should have the power to give what his prayers had denied. His soul was strangely calm, and a lightness replaced the heaviness of heart of late so habitual to him. The dim beauty of the church had impressed him, and he settled all his perplexity at last by the conclusion that this encounter with the mu-

sician whom he had befriended in dire extremity was the direct answer of the saints to his own devotions.

The Siberian express *de luxe* by which Catherine was travelling, hoping to overtake the regiment sooner than by the slower regular train, left Moscow every Saturday evening at a little before nine. They dined rather silently and sadly together in a quiet café, not wishing to be thrown with the stream of departing travellers dining and drinking wine together at the brilliant buffet of the station in true Russian style. As Catherine glanced up at the illuminated "God save the Tsar!" sparkling over the imposing façade of the white station, she caught her breath, realising in a flash the gulf even to-day existing between Poland and Russia; Warsaw and Moscow. To her this Moscow was a shrine, as she had truly said. She left it, to be nearer it in her service for holy Russia, to be a part of her country's history, to be worthy to sleep in the faith of those the Kremlin was so jealously guarding for the last judgment.

They were later than most of the intended travellers. Already the lights were shining forth assuringly from the windows of the train, making odd little figures on the pavement outside or falling illuminatingly on groups of friends saying their protracted adieux or making hurried last preparations for setting off on the long journey to the East. Uniformed officers were on every hand. Men with severe faces and deportment were kissing each other over and over as the final moment of departure approached. Everybody was talking, trying hard to joke and laugh, weeping instead, often. Krasemskin, eager to be on his way, was devoted but unobtrusive, while Catherine was at once surrounded by her friends and her place in the train filled with every form of parting

attention—flowers, wines, even a bright samovar for her exclusive use. She was white but tearless until the station master gave the signal, to which the monster engine responded with a gigantic sigh and a shrill whistle. A bell was rung, and before it was answered by another from the guard a train on the adjoining track began to move deliberately out. Catherine threw herself in the arms of her brother and silently embraced and blessed him for the last time. Raising her head from his breast she gazed deep into his eyes until he shuddered and closed them to shut out the fatal finality beneath their intense affection and deathless loyalty.

"Si gholi" (am going), she murmured in their native Caucasian. "Ghog mar!" (may you be happy!) Prashchaite" (farewell).

"Good-bye," he said in English for Nathalie's sake, using the word he had last heard her speak, sacred to him beyond any other. Again they embraced, for the last time, as if one of them were dying. Then it was over. He found himself deserted amid the crowd that stood stupidly staring after the train for Siberia, even yet an incredible miracle of civilisation to Russians. In imagination now Serge saw the interminable days spreading grey before her, the first eight hundred miles of dreary monotony, the climbing of the Urals, the icy crossing of Lake Baikal, the ultimate disembarkation amid scenes unfit for such a woman—except that she was such a woman and a general's widow, a Cossack's daughter. He felt sick with a sudden overcoming horror of her fate; he, too, perhaps, after a little question of months at most. He, too, perhaps! It would be his turn then to take his brave soldier boys out to die, dragging on their sluggish way in the soldier train, without comfort

or other hope than death before hostile cannon or official neglect. Perhaps he should be only grateful for the chance!

Suddenly his heart revolted. No! He would never go! It was too far from England. In death he must be near enough to reach Nathalie—if it came to that. He felt he was losing his self-control. The reaction was violently upon him. He was overcome by an imperative need of life, light, human beings about him. He knew he must have society, comprehension, pleasure; as never before he craved it now. He must forget! He was saluting his superior officers as he passed them automatically, without seeing or recognising them as he crossed the brilliant station-hall to reach the street. He remembered now. He knew where he was going, where he should find it all. First to the Opéra Comique, then to the Café Hermitage, the officers' favourite rendezvous, always thronging at midnight. It would be a gay place to forget one's self and the saints, and love and death and despair. This sickness of the soul would find a mastering drug in the scene of so many giddy recollections. To-morrow he must go back, back to his white-bloused soldier boys. They loved him—more, they idolised him. He must go back to them of course, back to drill and wrestle and ride; back to the bands and the buglers and mimic campaign of bivouac and the field. But to-night he was once more in Russia, real Russia, surpassing the joys of the Parisianised Petersburg. If he returned to Warsaw immediately he could not arrive until after midnight on Sunday. He would wait and go in the early morning and risk overstepping his leave by a few hours. The General would not be exacting with him under the circumstances. He would take one night of Moscow and he would not waste

it in sleep either. There would be other nights to sleep—time enough for that to-morrow and afterward. Something in his mental comparison of life in the Polish garrison town and Moscow put him in mind of the supper he had accepted for the next night at the *Europeische Hof*. He had intended to be back by the time it reached its height; if he did not appear, Wollenski, the Hussar who had bidden him, would certainly think him a savage. He started to telegraph his regrets, but as he was about to retrace his steps toward the telegraph booth, who should accost him but a young cousin from Kieff, and in his society Serge left the building, putting off his explanatory telegram to his friend until a later hour, an insignificant omission that was to cost him dear.

CHAPTER XV

AT THE CAFÉ HERMITAGE

OF ALL the brilliant and varied night scenes of Moscow there is none more characteristic than the resplendent Café Hermitage after a successful first representation of some ballet danced by favourite dancers or the return of some famous comédienne. As Serge, with his Cousin Mikhaïl Ouranoff, crowded into the popular resort, they were joined by numerous officers of their acquaintance, among them a captain in one of the Hussar regiments, well known to Serge, and happily encountered by chance in the crowd. Already there must have been a thousand people in the place. These were chiefly men, officers of course, although at a few tables there was an occasional actress to be seen with her attendant train of adorers, among them Klopfsky, the violinist, the gayest of the gay. Nor was the aristocracy lacking, represented by those of a rank so exalted that the mere mention of their names would be an indiscretion.

In the multitude of uniforms a woman was a sight sufficiently striking to excite attention and remark, but Serge was lost to any impression save the joy of life about him. Oddly enough, under the charm of the place and hour, he had given free rein to his imagination and had almost recaptured his happiness, as if no cloud had obscured it, and Nathalie was even now on her way to him. Hallucination it might have been in part, the promise of Klopfsky or the warming companionship about him, since wine, unless inordinately taken, has absolutely

no effect on the tongue or thought of a Russian officer. An hour might have passed as they sat smoking, drinking, eating their Camabrie cheese and pineapple—for the Russian eats when he feels like it, not by the clock. They had been talking of the war but little, more of their mutual acquaintance, a new play, an old scandal. At last Serge allowed himself to be drawn out and spoke suggestively of his own recent experience. He was proud of being the hero of so distinguished a romance, enlarging unconsciously upon the extraordinary beauty and wealth of his fiancée and all the tragic, sensational features of their parting. True, he cared nothing for these externals himself, but he knew his audience and how to produce his effect. His cousin heard him spellbound. Serge always had his followers. Whether he talked of adventure in exploits of military intrigue that never reach beyond the limitations of strategic headquarters, or of affairs of the heart; he lent a glamour to the telling. His small, finely shaped hands, employed in graceful extension of his theme, betrayed the nervous energy concentrated in them no more than the languid ease of his mental posture expressed his recent disenchantment with his destined career.

Suddenly but softly across the cleft of silence opened for an instant between the dying away of strident gipsy music and the resonant hum of reviving chat, a woman's voice became audible. Those who heard it listened. It tinkled as a clear blow of steel on crystal glass. It cut, by its penetrating quality, the volume of smoke and noise without soaring above it. Again it sounded—the peal of a merry bell. An officer or two ceased talking abruptly and stared in the direction from which it came. As they partly turned to glance behind them, others noticing their

action turned also. And again the low laughter was audible, distinct as if no one else was near. Apparently it came from a table where a woman sat with three of the smartest officers in Moscow and at her right one of the old Grand Dukes who ought to have been in bed and asleep in his own palace. Again she laughed—a rippling, delicious, spontaneous laugh. It was intentional. The attention she was attracting did not in the least disconcert her. She raised her glass then and roguishly laughed at them over the bubbling, golden wine at the brim. The men nearest her smiled back—then laughed outright. Others turned. Others began to laugh without knowing why. It grew, it spread. One by one they joined her, as it rippled on, always increasing in its infectious power. Swelling irresistibly, growing more contagious, helpless, a carnival of sheer mirth and folly—all because a pretty woman chose to amuse herself by amusing them all.

The waiters now were putting down their trays and standing with shaking sides. Their hands could no longer be trusted to pour even the thick, sticky liqueurs. Louder she laughed, the tears starting from her eyes. Now her face quivered as if beyond control, her breast was shaken hysterically. She put her hand to her heart, while a dainty little scream of ecstatic comedy escaped her scarlet lips. It was an intoxication of pure spirit, an incomparable performance. It broke over them as a whirling breeze over one of their own light wheat fields. They bent to the storm, overwhelmed by a joke they had not heard and convulsed by a situation they had not understood. When all the waiters had set down their dishes and bottles and fled to their pantry, and not one solemn face remained in the vast caravansarai, she slowly arose,

and over her lifted glass, still smiling, still laughing between her words, as if possessed by the fun of her frolic, she murmured to them all, as if telling them some delicious secret:

"I am Betty Sthyenne!"

They wiped their eyes and stared at her, only to howl again with a frenzy of applauding hands. Why had they not recognised her? It was indeed none but she! Their idol, their Betty! The cleverest actress in all Europe. It was Betty, their darling, come to reopen her Moscow season the next night and stealing a march on them thus! Betty, for whom they had waited all the long season. Their Betty, who had eaten their suppers and drank their champagne and thrown away their money and made them die a' laughing or weep at her caprice! They were on their feet as one man, toasting her with brimming glasses. The cry of "Betty Sthyenne!" was lifted to the ceiling. "Vive Betty!" "Salve Betty!" rang from one end of the Hermitage to the other.

"She is beckoning you, Serge. Come quickly, let us speak to her," urged the cousin as the riot subsided a trifle and those fortunate enough pressed about the table of the actress to kiss her hand. But to this proposal Serge remained indifferent, though they happened to have been sitting near her. Urged more warmly, he excused himself, pleading in extenuation his recent betrothal and consequent withdrawal from the life of his brother officers.

"If you are as much in love as that comes to, you are a fool to go out and be shot!" cried the cousin, referring with disgust to Serge's reiterated hope that his regiment might be mobilised at any moment for the far East. "If such a girl as you have hinted at loved me I would choose

a different fate for myself than to be a target for the rifle practice of the enemy!"

"If she proved that she loved you to your own satisfaction, perhaps," admitted Serge, already troubled by returning remembrance of actual conditions.

"Jealous already? And with Betty in reach? You may have forgotten her, *mon vieux*, and the nightingales of a certain spring not so long ago, but she has a better memory!" taunted the cousin.

"A woman's memory, cruel as the grave and less final!" chimed in Malenkowitz, the Hussar.

"Betty is all that is kind," dissented Serge.

"Not if not to forget, as you have been forgotten, is to be kind!" said the cousin. He was speaking in French, being very proud of his ability, since it was the language of diplomacy and marked him as of the *jeunesse dorée*. Serge started wildly at these words, because in his ear he seemed to hear again the voice of Nathalie saying to him between sobs, "Could you forget all other women for my sake? Could you wait alone for me, and still be faithful, Serge?"

How it all came back to him, even the odour of the tuberose that stood on the open piano near her! And his own awed response, given without hesitation, was, "I love you as a flower loves the sun." Yes, yes, a million times yes! He swore it afresh in his soul, and on his sword—to her and to no other woman, until she called him in life or death!

On a sudden impulse to leave the place at once, he rose to go, when another officer, well known in former years, sauntered toward him, glass in hand, and in the French so popularly cultivated by the dandies of the Imperial Guard, remarked, with an inclination in Betty's

direction: "La femme toujours, comme toujours! N'est-ce pas, cher Serge Ivanevitch?"

Serge lifted his head loftily without reply. But Malenkowitz had already raised his glass directly between them, saying as he did so, with a kiss waved over its brim to the actress, "Betty, the Incomparable! Vive!" adding to Serge, "Come, Stupid, drink quickly to her. She is looking." He added under his breath, as Serge remained unmoved, "Drink with me to the prettiest face in Russia!"

"I drink wine to no woman," boasted Serge stolidly.

"You demonstrate, then, our saying that in Petersburg hearts are always dry and the cafés wet!" cried Malenkowitz, perverting the familiar expression.

"What has come over you, that you reverse the oldest truth of all and act as if evening was more prudent than morning?" said the cousin, bewildered. "Be yourself again, cher camarade—drink to the prettiest face in Russia, do!"

Still Serge persisted in looking the other way, only remarking, "If she is pretty it is because she feeds on oats now, like the rest," meaning the gold that should go to the army and the horses went to her instead.

"It is true, no doubt, the horses get less to eat since the officers need more to spend on her," agreed the other, "but that is an affair of the Empire. Don't be so serious about it. See, she is smiling at you now!"

"She looks very charming when she smiles, and younger," said Serge nonchalantly. "Probably she remembers that."

"She may smile, but you will get a hot bath if you neglect her in public!" Malenkowitz reminded him.

"And all the world will be on her side!" declared the cousin. "Who would not fight for Betty Sthyenne?"

"All the world!" mocked Serge with disdain. "I scorn it! I would like to spit upon it!"

"Zut, prenez garde!" cautioned Malenkowitz. "Despising so universally might be supposed to include the Tsar, Serge Ivanevitch. The way to Siberia needs no guide-post."

"The heaven is high and the Tsar is far off," retorted Serge, employing a proverb equally familiar.

"But we live and breathe only by the imperial order, Prikazewo! It is ordered!" the Hussar reminded him obsequiously, lest they be overheard.

"Don't leave out the guardian angel," begged Mikhail Ouranoff, pretending to be shocked by such irreverence.

"If Serge Ivanevitch has a guardian angel, be sure it is a fallen angel!" said the Hussar.

"Don't disturb Serge Ivanvitch!" cried another officer, Polonski by name, who chanced along, but had heard nothing of the foregoing conversation. "When he looks as if he was saying his prayers, he is in reality thinking of Anna Dimitrovna. 'Tis true, is it not? You do not contradict me, Serge Ivanevitch?"

Serge recognised him with a careless smile.

"What, little one, are you grown up and out after dark alone?" he asked whimsically. "Where is your gipsy nurse girl you used to follow about? Do you indeed sleep alone now?" Amid the outcry at the victim's expense Polonski broke another bottle of champagne, saying, "Do not appear to hesitate too long. Betty will forgive you. 'I love you' is the key that unlocks every woman's heart. If you keep saying that over to her you may continue to be as free as you will, and as unfaithful!"

"And you a father of but two days!" remonstrated the Hussar.

"I am like Serge Ivanevitch—the hawk, not the stork, for my bird!" said Polonski unruffled.

He lifted his glass and arrested the gaze of the actress by his motion, then paused and glanced at Serge, who remarked audibly:

"After you, cher camarade, as the Devil says ever to Love."

Serge was carefully filling his own glass as he said it, letting the bubbles subside until the quiet liquor was even with the rim. He did not raise it, however, while Malenkowitz drained his at a gulp. When he was satisfied that not one drop more could be added without overflowing, he lifted it to his lips with a steady hand, and raising his eyes above the crowd said distinctly, so that he could be overheard by all those about him, "By the name of God I will drink to no woman, speak to no woman, but the Madonna, for a year to come!" And emptying his glass he allowed it to fall in crystal splinters on the marble floor.

"Then a thousand roubles to two hundred that you go straightway to a monastery to-night!" cried Malenkowitz in derision.

"Done!" cried another tantalisingly. "Here, Ouranoff, be witness of the stakes."

"Do not take it, it would be robbery," said Serge with a scornful smile. "But a thousand thanks for the value of your suggestion."

Betty Sthyenne had left her place and advanced toward them, but appearing not to see her white hand outstretched toward his own Serge turned and abruptly left the café, stalking like the wind at midnight.

The tangent was his normal course. He crossed the Theatre Place and, entering an hôtel near by, consulted the time tables feverishly. The incident of the Hermitage, that would formerly have been to him but a natural event in the regular social routine, assumed an undue importance in his newly aroused distrust of himself. These men had been his intimates, comrades in many an adventure. They knew him, oh none better! They estimated his weakness. They had laughed at his professions. They had intimated, one and all, that Betty was not one to be long resisted. Men were all alike. Klopfsky was there after making a sacred molében for his wife a few hours before! Everything appeared in a distorted relation. As by a revelation he saw the world stripped of illusions, ideals, dreams about it. He saw men and women on the earth beneath, and a deathly sickness of life, a sort of moral nausea, overcame him. He repudiated the past. His courage failed. Better to quit life altogether than to descend to the level of the conventional male brute, always falling a little lower, gratifying the animal passions until they became mere appetites, involving loss of self-respect, manhood, his soul's destiny. He still thought clearly enough to admit that in life sin is never the only open alternative. God is not so wicked. Since to murder himself was sin, suicide was not the answer to his problem, nor was it the easy pleasure to be found any moment with Betty Sthyenne and those of her caste. Again the plaintive chanting of the afternoon recurred to him, "Gospardi, Gospardi Pamilur!" Was it Saint Basil or Love Divine interfering in the affairs of the Cossack? Let Nathalie be untrue! He would prove himself an immortal in love! Into his mind flashed the refuge of the cloister, profaned by the wager of the

Hussar. It seemed a refuge when none other was to be found.

There was no deliberation to weaken his sudden resolve. Still overwrought, he had himself driven, not to the Gare de Smolensk, but to the Kursk station, from which the Tula lines depart for South Russia. At the station café he seated himself and ordering something to drink, and pen and paper, he began a brief last word to Nathalie. He sat there until it was time to take the train that he had somehow known always would be waiting for him before the earliest touch of morning reached the Redeemer Gate with its first faint finger. Over and over, Catherine's warning rang in his exhausted ears. He knew where he was going now. His uncle had gone before him. There would be no questions asked of him, no difficulties raised. He should be accepted with silent rejoicing. Life was over. There would be doors closed between him and the past, nay between his body and his soul. It was in his blood perhaps. From the vulgarity of suicide, as much as from the consequent pains of hell, he revolted. But this suicide of the earthly nature had in it something of the supernatural appeal that still held a lure for his imagination. He was a man of desperate intensity, to whom the feeling of the hour was that only for which he was created from the beginning, let it be of trifling or of mighty import. Tartar blood, the music of the Magyars, the colours of Teheran, had all gone into the making of that phenomenon—the Cossack soul. As a soldier he was all that was fiercest and most implacable. Bred in Byron and Lermontoff, as a lover he was all caprice, romance, jealousy and idealism. Almost a fanatic in his adoring patriotism, now all the Cossack superstition and the barbarism of the Greek Church

mysticism, imbued with the magics of the Orient, were driving him on to a career of equally passionate subjection, though of a nature opposed to all his former dreams. The meeting of Nathalie and Serge had been, in truth, the meeting of wind and flame. Was it to leave only ashes behind? However it might sound in far-away England his letter had been written in solemn sincerity. It was the soul of a Cossack that illuminated every word:

NATHALIE—Sole moonbeam of my darkest night. This is the last time my cry of love and pain shall trouble your dear peace. Forgive me! I shall never speak to any woman save the Virgin Mother of our God, until my soul speaks with yours in Paradise on that holy Easter morning after our resurrection. I do not kill myself, only because I wish to live for this hope. There exists now only a nameless Brother of Silence. In the monastery where I shall prison my tortured heart and keep my sacred vow, I shall be known to no one as

Your Lover,

SERGE IVANEVITCH.

And this letter, unlike all the rest, he sent in care of the Russian Embassy. And this letter, alas! unlike all the others, reached her, and doubly alas! too late. Nathalie read it with a choking sensation of finality.

CHAPTER XVI

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

THE Russian says, If fate does not find the man, the man goes to fate!

Perhaps it was the familiar calling of the River Don that drew Serge southward more than any ultimate destination or purpose: the Don, of which Pushkin and Lermontoff have sung so unceasingly, the music of whose current rings ever in the ears of the true-born Cossack. It might have been the spell of Queen Tamara, the Russian Lorelei, that lured him, from her castle on the lofty crags above the wild pass of Darjal, in the fierce glooms of the Georgian Road, where the lightnings breed their destroying forces. Impressions of his school days at Tiflis, of Mt. Kasbek, "watchman of the East," mingled disconnectedly in his mind with memories of the solitary monastery shot high in the air on its rocky bastion—the monastery of which he was never to speak to Catherine, because it reminded her of their dead mother and her sorrow in the loss of her only brother. All this rugged, familiar region of his youth promised him more than the fertile fields of Poland or the shining military routine of Warsaw. Involuntarily he went to them, seeking peace; went southward to the homeland of his father's race, urged by a resistless tribal affinity long dormant but never extinct. As Yermak fled from Ivan the Terrible to the snow wastes of Siberia, so this son of a Kazak fled from himself. The solitudes of the Siberian steppes were not solitary enough for his necessity. He craved a super-

natural barrier between himself and humanity. He must raise such a barrier himself, must hear a door close behind him as upon a prisoner. He must thwart and compress that tyrannical instinct that lies below all man's superficial morality or manner of life. To be saved for his love in eternity! that was his surviving cry. To be saved from himself! To be sure of the resurrection of their passion! For this end he would put himself beyond the power of the flesh to destroy. The Turk's lustful paradise with some dark-eyed houri none would have scorned more contemptuously, yet his own heart was at each beat concentrating with a tenser grip round a conception of a heaven but little less unspiritual. Foolish child! Reckless soldier! Amid this madness of despair, thwarted desire and wounded pride, at the mercy of his superstition and passion, who could do aught but pity and love him!

Around the eastern coast of Baku sweeps the railroad to Tiflis on the River Kura. It is the last halt of civilisation, called by the Russians the cross-roads between Asia and the East. Little Paris, they also call it; this last European town on the Asiatic frontier, situated at the end of the military road across the Caucas. Dulled as Serge was to the external by the bewilderment of his own emotions, when the never-forgotten landscape began to pierce and prod his recollection, the Cossack boast gave him a hint of the old thrill, "The Tsar rules at Moscow, the Cossack on the Don!"

His route now became more direct. At Vladikavkaz he left the train with the regret of profound inertia, shrinking from any renewal of action. He dreaded the resumption of personal direction. He would have preferred the train to run on indefinitely through eternity into ob-

livion. He had eaten little, slept scarcely at all. From Vladikavkaz the Georgian Road leads straight to Tiflis; built and run by the imperial government for military purposes, it remains the most audacious bit of engineering in the world to-day. In summer the diligence departs twice daily, pausing at Miletz for the night, and there is also the cheaper omnibus, which makes the passage in twenty-seven hours without stopping for a night's rest. Serge would not wait for either. With the fewest words possible he had chosen his horses and a light carriage, and after the briefest delay, he was again in motion. Relays were always procurable for gold, and these he arranged for in advance. By ten o'clock he was off again in the darkness, with a third horse attached to the side of the lightly harnessed team, in readiness for the heavier ascents. There was only the regular beat of their hoofs to measure the passing of time or the intensity of his personal preoccupation. It was twenty-five miles to the famous pass of Darjal, sung by Pliny and Herodotus, the terror of the drivers. Here the Caucasian Alps are encountered, a source of danger to the mariner of the Black Sea, attracting thunderstorms that rage with utmost violence and without warning. Even before the travelling carriage reached the pass to-night it would seem as if the wanderer's return had been made the occasion for a terrific display. This was no frolic of Valkyrie maidens. The hags of hell were abroad, demon-ridden. The cowering horses quivered as beneath the lash, settling back on their haunches only to leap forward again for escape when another blast of thunder pealed over them almost before the former flash that had blinded them was past. In the constant lightning it was easy to see that the poor brutes were white with foam.

They might have been spectre horses, goblin-driven. Furious, from the gorge below, wailed the voice of the Terek. The driver was alternately calling upon his horses and his saints, whipping his terrified beasts and crossing himself at incoherent intervals. The fiery ardour of the Cossack, whose glory is in danger, accepted the tempest with utter calm; nay, more than calm, for with every lurid flash and rending peal Serge exulted. Not yet was this soul dead to the world and the sublime excitement of nature's furious manifestation. It quieted his nerves as the opening shot in a battle had never failed to steady his pulses on the field. Like the echo of childhood, welcoming him, roared the din of the thunder, above the turbulent imprecation of the torrent. With much the sensation of a convict about to escape a life sentence of imprisonment by the swift deliverance of sudden death, Serge sat with folded arms waiting for the storm spirit to smite him with one crashing bolt. At every flash of lightning, after his eyes grew sufficiently controlled not to blink spasmodically at its vivid glare, he saw strange marvels of scenery thrown into high relief. Giant crags suspended half over their road, threatening destruction. Again, there opened a narrow defile where the lightning seemed to await them with a flaming sword, sheer precipice to one side, revealing the travellers as flies clinging to a jagged wall. As Serge grew more observant he described the luxuriant wealth of wild flowers in the intervals of forest, and later the avalanches of Kasbek, like eternal wrath under the glory of a flaming fire that shrank back from such dazzling whiteness like human passions before the face of the Almighty.

Gradually the rain ceased. The clouds were torn apart and the moon for an instant turned her pallid cheek upon

Kasbek. It was not far beyond here that they came out upon the Cossack fort, in the square valley below. Serge sat well back in his corner of the conveyance, when the well-remembered stronghold was actually reached, and the familiar challenge was given and answered. More than any hurt that savage nature could have done him he had dreaded this ordeal. By a fortunate chance it was all passed over without necessity of recognition, and he was allowed to proceed unquestioned. All the next day they drove, mounting some of the time through snow that made Serge shiver for lack of travelling rugs, though this physical discomfort could not add to his misery of mind. All day without incident to arouse him they climbed and descended and wound about and climbed again. At night-fall he must have fallen asleep, for he was conscious of waking when the carriage gave a wild lurch, and he bade the driver wake up; but it was only the scare-camel of the halting place at Amur, the ugly brute kept to accustom the horses to such a vision in the narrow passes of the road and so avert disaster. He had come dutifully padding out of his enclosure, and thrust his wet nose into the face of one of the greys that now made up the triple team, scaring the beast beyond all control by the sudden apparition, overdoing its ghastly part, it seemed to Serge, who was angry at any delay. Like a haunted spirit he was driven before his dream of peace. Nature exhausted was taking her revenge by weakening his emotional capacity. Sleepless nights at Warsaw, hopeless conjecture, suspense, the certainty of the end, had all contributed toward his present bodily and mental indifference. He had refused the shaslik and zakushka,—the boiled mutton and salt herring. Only a few morsels of brown soldier bread and the native Caucasian wine had passed his lips in

twenty-four hours. Now apathy beyond the pang of suffering seemed to be settling down over him. The irresistible eagerness to go on was still urging him to greater speed, but his motive had become shadowy, far away, and difficult to recall! The enforced delay, in consequence of a belated relay, tormented him vaguely; more by its lack of continued motion than for any definite reason. To the Russian travel is only a delightful incident, be it far and tedious, or near and made in luxury. They are possessed by the mania of movement, for which perhaps the roving tendency in the tribes of their remote ancestry may be responsible. Certainly to them distance presents no obstacle. Serge had accordingly set off on this journey from Moscow to Vladikavkaz with as little concern as if it had been an afternoon jaunt instead of a distance equal to that from Kronstadt to Constantinople. Every outlet of his nature had been dammed by the treatment he had received at the hands of Nathalie. He was dumb, dazed, inert. Once the driver arrested his horses under a pretext, to press some wine upon his fasting passenger, fearing perhaps to arrive with a corpse inside, which would involve him in early dreams of Siberia. At first Serge had refused brusquely, but afterward he had been touched by the man's concern, and drank eagerly. Then in the reviving vigour of the mounting wine he regretted that he had done so, for the struggle within him began all over again. Deeper than his wounded pride with its shy self-distrust and dread of comparison with her European suitor, deeper than the broken heart, he still preserved his faith in the soul of the only woman he had ever loved. Again and again he put from him the thought that she was false to him. He scorned to believe it, as unworthy of them both. He could admit it possible, without degradation of her

in his eyes, that, being a woman, she had been overwhelmed by superior forces beyond her power to resist. During his days of tortured suspense in Warsaw, while Catherine still lingered beside him, he might easily have written to his young sister, the wife of the diplomat in London, and been speedily informed. But he scorned the position of a spy. He resented the need of interference between Nathalie and himself. In love as in war he was a fatalist. She must come to him without importunity or reproach if she loved him, or her coming would lose its meaning for them both. He would never stoop to defend himself. If he had been unjustly accused it was his fate. On his impetuous journey, un comforted by memory or hope, by day, by night, this decision he had never reversed. It stamped itself upon him freshly as he paced the road before the refuge at Amur, that she would never yield herself to another, though she might have been turned from him against her will. Whatever held her from him he could swear she would love once, as he. She was of that race of Asra, "who love and die." To this one hope he held as the star in his soul's night, refusing to allow it to dwindle or disappear.

She would read his letter and be convinced of her frailty, if she had believed ill of him. She would see in his flight from the world the devotion he had vowed to her. If her weakness had placed her in the power of the cousin round whom his jealousy raged, she would learn too late what love she had crucified by her betrayal. Let his loyalty be flung in her face! It was a legitimate revenge. Let it save her, perhaps, from the sacrifice she might be on the point of completing! Here his reasoning broke down, if reasoning it had any right to be called. Momentum of previous impulse alone car-

ried him to his goal. In the scarcely visible grey of the coming dawn, hours later than he had counted, because of the unexpected detention, he left his weary driver and set forth on foot alone to climb the steep winding path that ascends to the monastery on the hills opposite Tiflis, its rough walls of variegated stone barring his way at last. As he stood at the grated gate waiting for admission the sun rose blood red and was swallowed up in a ragged cloud, grey like a garment of sackcloth, leaving the barren prospect comfortless and chill. Already the bar was slipping inside. Already the door was grating on its hinges. Beneath a black cowl, half covering an emaciated face of the haggard brother who stood before him, he recognised his uncle, as his last reluctance slipped from him. Into the arms outstretched to receive him by the astonished saint he fell as one dead, famished, worn out, at the end of will or reason. As his eyes closed he muttered his one desperate prayer: "Guard me, my uncle! She has sent me to you!"

The Russian Church is very forgiving, quite catholic, and absolutely indiscriminate in rendering aid to those in need. Without a question the door was shut—shut between the Cossack and the world forever. Serge Ivan-evitch was no more.

It was a silent order, and of him no questions were ever asked. The Church could not mitigate the sentence of desertion. He could not be accepted as a monk, nor could his voluntary surrender of all his life to the Church lighten his punishment. But as long as it left him in his retreat he did not care for the severity. So the Church assumed his sin and his expiation under the direction of the head of the order, his uncle.

At his first assistance in celebration of the Mass he

realised that here there were to be no sensuous auxiliaries to the transport of the spirit. As always, the cross and other sacred pictures hung in their invariable order; on the south wall, in the place of honour, the Redeemer; next to the Saviour Saint Basil, to whom the monastery was dedicated; on the north wall the Madonna. To the north wall went his prayers and meditations most often, for to the north lay England, as much as it lay anywhere outside his own heart. But none of these pictures were encrusted with jewels, there was no lapis lazuli, nor malachite. It was a harmony simple and austere. The officiating priest standing at the top of the stairs leading to the altar was his uncle. The three doors of the screen behind him were open, revealing the holy table, with its four small columns supporting a canopy from which the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, was suspended and upon which lay, as always, the cross, the Gospel, and the box containing the elements for the visitation of the sick and dying. Here was no glory of lights, no rapture of music to intoxicate him with eternal peace, only the promise of total seclusion and the preparation for death. He could not be bound until he was thirty, and of that he still lacked a few weeks. The black habit of the monks of St. Basil could not be his until the final taking of his vows after three years of preparation, but he already wore the cassock of the novice and his fect, after their career in cavalry boots and spurs, shuffled oddly in the sandals that alone kept them from the stone flagging.

Silently he performed the humbler, coarser duties of the novitiate, such tasks of the monastery as had become too heavy for the old men, prematurely aged from fasting and lack of exercise. Silently, too, he was ac-

cepted; all being made straight before him by the powerful hushed command of that austere figurehead that never, since his first mistaken daring, Serge had dared to address as his uncle. Never had one question concerning the welfare of those loved in former years been asked or tolerated. Human relations had here passed away. Here there were only accounted individual souls before the eternal Presence.

Bleak to heaven rose the loveless walls of the monastery. Within the stony enclosure a cross or two marked the resting place of some restless brother's nameless dust. The weather-beaten chapel looked toward Kasbek in its eternal lustre, "the pavilion of the Almighty" lifted magnificent above the insignificant human worshippers. Far, far below fumed the rock-pent-river. This was no exhibition monastery, visited by curious sight-seers and enlivened by chance hints of the outer world of European event. Vespers succeeded matins, fasts waited upon vigils. There was nothing here, from day to day, to break the deathly peace of these men with faces of ineffable sadness, scarcely human, who seemed to have in truth succumbed to a melancholy madness of piety, submission, more than adoration, wearing the hours of their years away.

To Serge the novelty appealed, then the beauty—then came the restlessness of death. His first cry had been a warning, and had not been given in vain. He was guarded as never soldier on duty knew how to guard a suspect. He was scarcely allowed even to mingle in silence with those other human shadows as he performed his share in the general tasks appointed to them all.

For a time the fever of his being was cooled. As he assisted in the holy observances his spiritual communing

was more with Nathalie than heaven. There was an interval of exaltation, followed by one of entire dejection. Apathy succeeded revolt, as revolt had previously succeeded calm. The white face of Kasbek began to haunt him in his dreams. He saw it lifted free to the red sunrise, or revealed by the lightning flash, or death-like beneath a pallid moon, as he had seen it last. It became a fixed idea with him. Then the voice of the water far below rang in his ears, warning, commanding, calling, cursing, complaining, blessing, entreating—until he believed himself going mad at last. Above the chiming of the silvery-toned bells, those copper bells of the Caucas Nathalie had loved, and under the chanting of the brothers at divine service, across his prayers for peace, the river, as the fever of life was calling, Away! Away! Away!

Even when he repeated to himself a thousand times the unvarying formula, "Jesus, save me, God, have mercy on me! Holy Mother of God, intercede for me!" his petition could not drown out the calling, calling, of that persistent river as it fled past the monastery to the valley below, seeking the sea away! Away! Then—then—he regretted what he had done. Too late he realised with the cruel clearness of a clairvoyant, that the only barrier between Nathalie and himself he had raised, intoxicated with his own woe. And with this certainty, which turned religion to blasphemy, he fought night and day. He grew pale as the most bitter ascetic of them all, and wan as the pictures of the saints, his eyes burning and staring from their sockets, visibly sunken. Deliberately he had shut himself up alive. He had walled himself in from the world, where the woman he adored was free. He had immured himself by a vow. He had torn

the spirit from the body while she remained in the flesh and the joy of its habitation. He was a prisoner of his own making with the eternal eye upon him as sternly as the lifeless eyes of the brotherhood that never would mitigate his sin if they guessed its enormity.

Hell was everywhere to him then. For to go was certain perdition, and to stay was leaping flame, a consuming fire that did not kill and leave but ashes to blow over the walls toward the bare clefts of Kasbek. And now the river moaned and struggled as if throttled by human monsters, and it ran faster to escape the shadow of the monastery, like a creature in extremity or deadly pain.

CHAPTER XVII

WITH THE RIVER

For months the process of daily dying continued. Sometimes all the vehemence of his ardent nature was converted into fervour for his vocation, sometimes he longed for the whirl of life and the heat of passion. Autumn and winter dragged their weight away. The time of returning lilacs brought nothing of perfume or beauty to the monastery, but the song of the nightingale penetrated even the walled heart, and with the nightingale the listener knew the flower of his soul must have bloomed again to gladden the sorrowful world. The bird became at once his sweetest solace and most cruel stab of pain. He could but listen as he toiled. He was ceasing to think now, he only moved more sadly, as if the beauty of the imagined springtide burdened him beyond the weight of the load he was already sustaining.

One evening in late May as he sat alone in the cloister yard, he heard the bird so near him that he spoke to it without realising the strangeness of a voice in that silent place. "Fly away, little soul!" he said lovingly. "Fly away to happier hearts with your songs of passion and of pain!" And again the nightingale sang out of its heart unto the night, its piercing sweetness breaking the eternal monotony of the river with a physical relief to the ear past expression. The Novice listened, though shrinking from the entranced delirium of the ecstatic song, which was alone a temptation. When all was silent he spoke again.

"Little angel of heaven, you are too sweet. You will break my heart!" And still the unconscious bird, without a dream of tempting a human soul, sang on, pouring out its ecstasy into those famished ears, until all the love of distance and the envy of joyous wings smote the prisoner within, who cried again:

"Fly quickly, Joy of the Night! For already my heart is restless within me as the golden fireflies of the Steppes, the wandering souls of little children that may never find rest!"

Then, as if at last she understood, the nightingale was hushed, perhaps before a sorrow inexpressible in song, and the listener was alone.

It was a little lacking the completion of his first year in the silent brotherhood, when there came a night on which he had sunk to sleep earlier than common, comforted by his prayers perhaps, or lulled by the winds that had suddenly risen off the mountains and drowned the calling of the cruel, sleepless river below. It was louder than ever at this season, too, supposed to be an especial retreat of the Russalka, or water nymphs. By rivers like this they sit in the green rushes, combing their flowing hair like any siren, beguiling youths and maidens into the stream with them to drown. The ripple of the water is the voice of the Russalka, who disappear in winter, but in spring return and mingle their cry for clothing with the winds, until the peasants half in pity, half in fear, hang some garment near their huts to avert displeasure of the fay. To-night the winds held carnival alone. Serge had slept a dreamless sleep and was awakened by a long, ghostly whisper. It was not the river. Of that he was immediately assured, since he had heard his own name. It was his name of life and the

living, his lost, forgotten name, Serge! It was the voice of a dream only, but to his easily excited fancy, distraught by loneliness, fostered on the faith in miraculous visions and thrilled by the calling of the nightingale, it was the voice of Nathalie—Nathalie crying out to him in the depths of the night that separated them—"Serge!" The notes of the Rubinstein nocturne rushed over him as the blood flew to his pale face. It was Nathalie who called—"Serge!"

Name already long cast aside with the other weaknesses of youth and the flesh—what chords it smote! What a birthday of hope dawned from that adorable accent! She had called him. Swift as a stealthy animal of the jungle he sprang from his hard shelf that served as a bed. From his cell to the chapel was no unusual path for him in the dark hours of his tormented nights. Others had done the same in their turn, never the aged, but those younger converts who oftenest needed to find repose for their stricken souls at the foot of the altar, when the lusts of the flesh proved too strong to die at command. To-night this was no seeker for the vantage ground of divine peace. His vigil would be but brief, although it was to be his last. The river had won. Howl on, oh tempest, and batter the ramparts of the night, and shake the grim walls about him that these human footsteps may pass unperceived by the ears of the faithful! Flow faster and more furious yet, oh river! Cry and exult in the havoc you have wrought with your mad salutations of away! away! Your voice has not been hoarse in vain and never more will you taunt one desperate young brother to the suicide of body or soul.

At the hour of the early celebration the next morning they found the note he had left at the foot of the altar.

It was a leaf torn from the sacred evangel, and on it were written but four words, "She has called me."

Had the Russalka sung him down to her death-kiss in the gleaming flood below? Had one tossed her silvery foam to the moon as a shroud for him? Full of pain and warning the river flung wildly on. They heard her as they turned their ashen faces aside, speechless, as ever. The brotherhood had understood. It was a tragedy too appalling to be met by aught save the sacred habit of silence and prayer. He had gone. That was enough. Whether to his life or death, to them it was the same catastrophe.

But the deserter, assured of his escape, was almost overcome by the delirium of freedom. From the monastery to the town he met no one. Emerging from the forest to the highway, the old habit of the light Cossack stride asserted itself. His cramped limbs were first to regain a hint of their old ease. His knees, worn with vigils on cold pavings, shook idly from time to time. One by one his unused senses reported to his brain. His nostrils, too full of incense, dilated to the soft odours of the forest flowers in the night dews, distilling a profanely delicious perfume. He stopped just to inhale the dampness of the earth and moss, then hurried on in a frenzy of fear. Day must not overtake him here! He passed to the northward of the city, avoiding the streets that led to the heart of the little capital, and gained the road to Batoum unmolested. At the very edge of Tiflis, under a wild hedge of cactus, lay a peasant asleep. The night was not cold and he had probably counted on being astir by dawn. Here was the opportunity. Serge had been imploring of chance. The Russalka were not more in need of clothing than he, nor was that other water

spirit, that fasts all winter long, any more hungry. Hastily he stooped over the sleeper, who was drunk and seemed likely to remain so for long hours. It was the work of a moment to divest him of his long Caucasian coat and replace it with the brother's habit. With what he had Serge was generous to the end. Drawing off the high peasant boots he hastily put them on his own bare feet. It was robbery, but after robbing the church of his soul, what did the worn-out rags of a drunken peasant-shepherd matter? At all events, clothing was necessary if the Cossack was to get away unhindered. Accordingly, the opportunity was to Serge a sign of divine favour, impossible as it may be for the universal mind to conceive Providence as supplying objects for highway robbery. Just as he had never doubted Nathalie's call, he did not doubt that he should receive supernatural aid in his undertaking of the journey across Europe, penniless and doubly an outlaw, a deserter from the army and the cross. He regretted that he had no money to bestow upon the peasant, but placing the taper he had brought from the sanctuary to guide him through the forest path in the ground beside the sleeper, he made the sign of the cross in the soft earth before it, trusting to the native superstition of the peasant to believe himself the recipient of a holy visitation. Serge smiled as he imagined the man boasting of the supernatural adventure in the nearest wine shop after his awakening. Probably he would rejoice. He might even interpret it as a call to the conventual life! Serge was amiable enough to hope so. He walked on as if his own feet had been shod with wings instead of clumsy hide boots that hurt him at every step. The night was still his protection. The first grey of the dawn had not laid her warning upon him until he took

the rocky road between the mountains at the dejected village of Mtskheth, where the Georgian road intersects. He realised fully as he fled, that Batoum must be his objective point. From Batoum, Constantinople—then Europe, freedom—Nathalie! The means to his end he ignored. Resourceful by nature and training he concerned himself with the moment only. Escape was already his. The drunken peasant was a miracle, showing the divine favour. The God whom he had served so unctuously for so many long months and eluded so unceremoniously at last, would be gracious enough to perform others equally felicitous. Of this he rested assured. And in this easy conviction he knelt and said his customary matins with more enthusiasm than ever during his days of prescribed vocation. At Kaspi, in the first grey light, the white face of Kasbek was again lifted upon him; the Kasbek of his inner visions during all those days and nights of close confinement, but this time actual and enduring, rock-ridged and glacial, not to vanish with the ringing of some sweet matutinal bell. If he could reach the Georgian village of Gori unnoticed, he felt he was safe from pursuit or detection, for there the bare rocks, beneath which the everlasting song of the torrent made him deaf, give way to the covering and covert of the forest, offering a gracious retreat and if necessary permanent concealment. He did not know in the least what to expect from the community he had left behind. Whether avoidance of publicity and the scandal of his flight would deter inquiry, or whether already from Tiflis the news of his desertion had put the pursuers on his track. He knew the church must pronounce upon him the expulsion from all believers, had he been actually an accepted monk. During his probationary period he was

not so sure. It might be treated as a private matter. He feared he knew not what. Anathema even was lightly to be borne as the price of freedom in this glad world of open air. He panted to get out of the rocky channel of the narrow road that afforded no possible ambush, and though ready to faint from the unusual exercise and lack of nourishment, his iron will kept him walking as surely no officer of a cavalry regiment was ever seen to walk before. For an hour the cavalry officer, whose boast it was that he had never marched, marched on, tramping through the greyness with dread for his sole companion. Suddenly, on turning a sharp defile, he overtook a drove of sheep and their shepherd, going in the same direction as himself. It was very apparently too large a drove for one man to manage, even with the aid of the sweet-faced anxious dogs that were doing their best to keep the herd moving. To the surprise of the fugitive, the shepherd waited for him to come up and accosted him. He spoke in the Georgian dialect and after the exchange of a few sentences Serge was hired to assist him in driving the flock to Batoum, "a matter of several days at least, at this sheep's pace," according to the shepherd, "and lonely enough, too, for a solitary soul, on these dangerous roads, so unlike the high mountain pastures." The fellow who had set out with him, he explained, had got drunk somewhere back, and it was no use waiting for him. As long as he had a kopeck he would drink more. Serge was thankful enough for this second intervention of Providence. Here was a chance to earn food and a few roubles, and since their way lay together, what better disguise than this pretence of innocent occupation? At last he felt sufficiently prepared to pass unobserved by detecting eyes that might scan the road for the witless

novitiate from the monastery above Tiflis. So thinking, he plodded contentedly along behind the flock.

They were mainly white, as the Caucasian sheep usually are, the rams with great curling horns marching proudly as officers on parade. Among the flock were also numberless impish goats, with twisted horns and agate eyes set slantwise; satanic, satiric, left-hand outcasts by reputation and preference! As the morning passed, the undulation of the throng of woolly backs before him came to seem to the weary gaze of the Cossack-shepherd like the river flowing interminably below, singing low to itself now, as if appeased. As the moving white mass went forward, filling the road to its steep banks, always beneath the sound of their myriad tiny hoofs he heard the voice of the Kaura, now calling him as the Terek had called, only with an alluring soft-swelling sweetness, Away! Away!

The rhododendrons were still in towering bloom in the dense shade of the mountains, and wild flowers almost as tall as a man, were in profusion. In his physical weakness he half slept as he tramped on, half dreamed of a horse under him, with the cradling Cossack gait swaying to the movement of the flock. After he started he had never once questioned his call. Just as he had fled when he believed Nathalie lost, so he returned when he believed her his. Nothing could have dissuaded him. That she had leashed him, discarded him, doomed him, bound him hand and foot to her worship and then turned him over to the Virgin, he dismissed by his inevitable fatalistic "Prikaz." It was commanded. The army had won him, the church played for him, love had doubled the stakes, and the end was not yet.

At Mikhailowo they crossed the river and descended

to the fertile plain of the Souram, walled in by lofty mountains. But whether their road led through gentle valley or wooded crest, the torrent always ran along beside them, until at Koutais they passed over it by superb stone bridges and were in the great plain of Rion. When the sea became distantly visible, the impatience of the Cossack could no longer endure the chastened pace of the flock. How gladly would he have drunk of the goat's milk for the last time and set off alone, forfeiting half his paltry wage for the delirious joy of speed! But for him safety lay in the rôle of shepherd and he was obliged, by prudence, to curb his fretting desire and plod on.

Arriving at Batoum, worn but hardened by the exercise in the open, he found a ship loading for the Golden Horn, as he had seen it night after night in his dreams, while the herd lay stretched about him, their white outlines expanding before his heavy eyes to the dim white sails of his visions. After some slight pleasantries, in the form of small coin, exchanged with an obliging seaman, he let himself as under-porter, and as such won the good will of the steward by chance, and was given an inferior place in the ship's kitchen. Taking it, with a prayer to the Madonna for aid in his new duties, he sailed away unchallenged, the responsibility of his return being with the ship's commander. It must have been a diverting sight to watch the brilliant officer of the gleaming One Hundredth Orenburg Cossacks doing the duties of scullion as painstakingly as he had ever insisted his own soldiers should brighten his saddle silver or polish his own varnished boots. He, whose fees to the waiters had been the proverb of cafés, was doing menial duty without a sigh. Undoubtedly it was as proudly as disdainfully

performed. At least it was so much to the satisfaction of the friendly steward that the engagement was made permanent, with a vague promise of cabin table work after a few more journeys, if he proved himself apt. Thus it came about, that the steward, relying on the fact that his scullion had received no wages, allowed him to wander about a little over the ship, as it re-loaded, and the occasion for a second escape was not long in presenting itself at Constantinople.

Taking advantage of the opportunity given by being sent on a commission for the steward to a nearby provision booth, where the ship's larder was partially replenished, he slipped into a sailor's café near the quay, and ordering a few kopecks' worth of vodka, like any Caucasian or Russian slavey, drew from his blouse a slip of paper he had picked up in the ship's cabin forward, and a stub of a crayon used to mark the merchandise for transportation, also abstracted from the hold of the merchantman. He knew it was useless to attempt to present himself at an hôtel in search of the friend upon whom he had unconsciously depended ever since he broke loose from the monastery fastness. He would never be permitted to do more than show himself at the glittering hostelry before he would be kicked unceremoniously into the street. He had, in all, at his command only a little over a rouble, since of his meagre shepherd wage he had squandered one rouble on a forlorn woman who had begged of him. And only this present riches had been saved by good luck, for Serge could never refuse a beggar, however worthless. With this solitary rouble he was about to throw his stake for immediate rescue. If the communication he had begun to write reached the eyes of his former friend, the rest was plain. If not, he

must try again, with less immediate hope of success. At least, was he not in Constantinople, alive and free? Nothing could depress him for a moment. He hummed the reckless air of many a wine supper,

"Madame, ia vam skasat obiasan,
Ia ne gueroi, ia ne gueroi"

as he wrote. His hand shook oddly and his writing seemed to him to have preserved its peculiarity, only as the cramped hand of an old man resembles the script of his youth. But the details were the same; any one once familiar with it would recognise from whom it came, he decided. He had not risked signing his name. It was a blind appeal, for who could be sure how generally his desertion, both of the regiment and the cloister, had been advertised? Benumbed by the former indiscretion more than the latter sin, he ventured only these few words:

"I beg you, send only your card by this messenger, the man knows where, to enable one you love to come to you, in trouble."

The next difficulty was to find a messenger. None but a European, and no one who could read Russian would he trust. Where to find such a person? And, in his present costume, how to inspire sufficient respect to warrant execution of the errand? Where was there a youth, or girl either, of sufficient honesty not to take the fee and drink at the nearest open door, without further thought of his commission? The human dregs of the seaport were about him. Delay was perilous. He concluded to play the part himself. He walked without the haste that might give him the appearance of a man wishing to elude detection, stopping to gaze open-mouthed

at the streets, as if new to the shore and its sights, until he came in view of the Pera Palace Hôtel. Then making his way to the servants' entrance he asked a porter, just then bringing out a monster European trunk on his shoulders, if he knew if a certain Russian, Count Nicolai Yevendewski, still remained in the place. The porter was surprised to hear a ship's scullion speak in French. He was a Swiss himself, and he stood stock-still to listen, balancing the trunk perilously swaying on his shoulder.

His reply made the heart of Serge thump heavily in his breast.

"Yes, M'sieur le Comte remained, as ever, in his apartment on the third floor."

He would have passed on, but Serge stood directly in his way. The porter glared at him.

"How is it your affair?" he asked. "Get out of my way! This trunk is heavy."

Serge instantly stood aside, as if frightened at having inconvenienced so high a personage as a porter of the Pera Palace. When the man had set his burden down and returned, Serge again accosted him, apologetically.

"Could you make it possible for me to speak to the Count for one moment?" he asked, as if breathless at his own audacity.

"You?" cried the porter incredulously. "It is not possible! What excuse could I have to offer for such presumption? You would be chased from the door even now, if I had not been seen in conversation with you. Be off!"

Serge drew his one rouble from his blouse. The man saw it.

"I would give all I have in the world to speak for one moment to that Russian Count," he said sadly, as if sure

of refusal. His eyes filled with tears, as if he saw himself kicked into the gutter, in advance, for his request.

The porter stepped closer to him.

"Tell me, Mon garçon, what is the nature of your affair with M'sieur le Comte? Would it bring me to trouble?"

"Not the least in the world!" cried the scullion. "On the contrary, he would be glad to receive me if he knew——"

"Oh, probably! A scullion lad from a mean ship of merchandise!" mocked the porter.

"Mais oui, c'est la vérité," murmured the other, "for I have brought him something he has lost. Something he valued very dear."

"Ah! something no doubt you have stolen for a reward!"

"I have said only the truth. Now will you assist me?"

"It would be better for me to call the police to help you!"

"Do it, and I will lay the blame upon you!"

"Where is the article you have stolen? I will not return it to him. He might even think it was I who had robbed him."

"It is not an article—it is information," said Serge, speaking very low and raising his eyebrows with the confidential glance of one revealing a disguise and sure of being understood. At the same time he changed entirely his manner of speaking French, saying in the purest Parisian accent, "We will drop the farce now, if you please. Go quickly. Do not keep me waiting here. It is of importance to Monsieur le Comte. Take this money and this bit of folded paper. You will make

something by obeying. Do not delay or you will be too late to find me on your return. I am très pressé."

The tone of command was unanswerable. The porter actually bowed to the ship's scullion and disappeared.

To Serge, awaiting his return, each minute seemed an incalculable eternity. All his dreary way across the mountains and the sea had been child's play in comparison with this. There he had been in the friendly inhumanity of nature's care. Here he had given himself over to the enemy. This servant might even now be satisfying the hôtel authorities that a madman or a dangerous political refugee was actually within the house. At the sound of each footfall he trembled. When accosted by other porters to know why he blocked the entrance he replied in Georgian that he was only waiting. And some understood and others merely cursed him as they passed out. When he saw the figure of the Swiss porter returning alone down the narrow passage he could not stand without leaning against the wall for excitement. The moment had come. His friend might be away, might refuse, might—he closed his eyes, then faced the crucial instant of failure or success, safety or peril, coming down upon him with each creak of the porter's boots. Surely then the porter was speaking, though from inward confusion he hardly understood the import of his words until he had twice repeated them and even taken hold of him roughly. Was he under arrest then? No, for the porter was pushing him toward the baggage lift.

"By this way," was what he was saying under his breath. Not one word was spoken as they slowly ascended to the third floor. "By this way," repeated the porter, and they hurried down a hall and up another,

pausing finally at a door on the front, heavily curtained with plush to keep out intrusive noise.

Count Nicolai Yevendewski will not forget for some few chapters of his own eventful personal history the afternoon when a stranger of mean degree appeared at this plush-draped door of his suite of elegant apartments in the Pera Palace Hôtel, having eluded the vigilance of the service and gained access to the friend he would not be denied. Undoubtedly the Count's private servant would have sent him reeling about his business, without mercy, except that the Count was happily inside with a bit of yellow paper in his hand, scrawled over in a chirography familiar though unsigned. Believing himself to recognise a voice fondly known in the past, he stepped to the door himself, just in time to see there a person dressed as a marine scullion, but with a toss to the fiery head belonging to none but the free-born Kazak.

He had not forgotten the part played by his gallant friend Serge Ivanevitch in rescuing him from a sensational predicament not so many years before, and without seeming to do more than exhibit a noble pity for a man in poor circumstances with a grievance, shielding his recognition beneath a tone of assumed benevolence, he courteously invited the stranger in. Then, thanking the Swiss porter for his service by a bit of gold, he closed the door, and locking it took his friend into his arms; an embrace that promised all unheard, asking and forgetting nothing, in the true Russian spirit of affection and reserve.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM THE CAUCAS TO THE WORLD AGAIN

FROM that first blighting afternoon, when at the instigation of Sir James Nathalie had been summoned in vain to tea and tears with Lady Janet, there had been no visible moping on her part. Her behaviour had been extremely misleading, according to her aunt, who would have enjoyed an exchange of nervous misery, while her afflicted niece in negligées of chastened hue gave herself to sorrowful brooding, and incidentally an increased supervision of the especial wants and comforts of the older invalid. To her mind Nathalie's experience should have left her more sympathetic with the troubles of those about her. But to this ideal of herself, as a drooping-winged ministering angel, Nathalie had failed to respond or correspond. There had been no weeping, no shutting herself up in her aunt's deeply shaded sitting-room. If Serge had discarded her with contempt, in a manner most obnoxious, at least she need not make herself a worthy object of his scorn by grieving over him! She had also the tonic of knowing that he would never guess how she suffered. Even his farewell cry to her, delivered through the Russian Embassy, had scarcely emphasised her desolation. Moreover, out in the world there was always the chance of hearing something about him by meeting some one who had Russian connections. She was on familiar social terms with the diplomatic corps

and met its members constantly. A word might at any moment elicit the very thing she was dying to hear, yet dreading to have confirmed; a word she could not trust any other to speak for her in the fierce shyness of her young shame. She had swept into her aunt's room on that first bitter afternoon looking like a Grecian princess, her small head bound with a golden fillet, her eyes brilliant and colour high. The clinging gauze robe with its gleaming sequins had seemed to Lady Janet barbaric in its splendour—at which Nathalie had shown the bad taste to laugh aloud. Lady Janet had expressed a dubious preference for something more girlish.

"Girlish!" had been the equivocal rejoinder, with a tightening of the delicate nostrils, denoting suppressed animosity and reminding her listener unpleasantly of Sir James's agitation earlier in the day.

Night after night she had repeated her success. She was untiring in her reign over the heart of society as she was despotic, though to no one did she give the least preference of approach to the well-kept secret of her own heart. If it was true that:

"all day long remembered things were dragging at her soul"

the snares were well out of sight of the multitude she delighted in her radiant orbit. Indifferent, her detractors called her. The Americans, looking on in triumph over their countrywoman's fame, retorted, "No more so than befits an heiress carrying the price of any one of England's nobility in her closed hand!" The papers described her gowns at length; Morét, over from Paris at the command of royalty, seeing her, asked as a personal favour to do her portrait without compensation—for art's sake and his own pleasure—which struck a cold thrill through the

thrifty British marrow. Her head might well have been turned by her furor. Always an amusing companion, she became a really clever raconteuse. Older men, the veterans of former generations, liked to take her in to dinner, not for the sake of their increasing sweet tooth alone, but because she could talk to them in a way that made them forget the immediate inferno of indigestion before morning. In the ballrooms the dancing men swarmed hotly, praising her magnetism of motion, her enchantment of rhythm. She was a feature of the season. It was even whispered about quite unreservedly that royalty had remarked and approved, might indeed signal her out for further favour, instructed by the infatuated Morét as to her qualifications—all of which intrenched Lady Janet in her frequently repeated opinion that Nathalie was all on the surface, like her mother before her, to which Hilary replied languidly that there were only about so many ways for a woman to take an unhappy love affair, and she ought to be thankful Nathalie had spared them philanthropy or ultra-religion. Sir James was elated with a blend of justification and glory. He had about ceased to worry over the little pile of unopened letters with their blue Russian stamps and delicate foreign writing, in the drawer underneath the right-hand corner of his heavy black-oak desk. It was less and less often now that a spasm of regret overtook him—almost never, unless he had been eating imprudently and had to sit alone indoors and stare at that same black desk hour by hour, knowing what was inside. Nathalie had come to her senses as he had predicted. It had all turned out for the best. Sir Oracle had been justified. Every minister of state was obliged to resort to high-handed methods of statecraft when necessity arose. If, in do-

mestic revolution, he had felt it important to establish a rigid censorship of the mails during temporary stress, what other leader had not at some crisis done the same, to stamp out revolution and restore order? Surely Russia could not gainsay such a course! And had not Balzac stated explicitly that a soul incapable of duplicity could never be great? Clever writer, Balzac! Sir James was not a wide reader and had never liked what he had read of any Frenchman's twaddle until he found that one illuminating phrase. It was mighty convenient, too, that the fanatical sister, Catherine, was out in Japan still with her soldiers. He knew, for he had sent Watson to Nathalie with one letter from her bearing the Pekin postmark, since which no more had come. Perhaps she had died out there. Divine wisdom was certainly "playing up," as Leatherby would put it.

From this period of complacency he was startled one afternoon by hearing Lord Gore remark, as he set down his empty teacup for a second replenishing at Nathalie's hands:

"How you must have suffered to be so brilliantly amusing, Miss Mainwaring!"

"The Cossack says, 'God owns the brave,'" she said with a little shrug of defiance for his first attempt openly to pierce her mask.

"And pities them too," he added with a lowered voice, as if he understood her better than she wished. If he expected her to soften under this sudden assumption of nearness to her truer self he was to be disappointed. Her answer came in a clear voice, well calculated to reach the ears of Sir James.

"There, I agree with Napoleon," she maintained with a cool smile; "God is on the side of the big battalions!"

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He did not catch the quick reply of Lord Gore or the retort of his niece, but the man laughed aloud, as if her sally had been a keen thrust, a parry as well turned as the attack had been provocative. It seemed to Sir James rather an ugly attitude for the girl, blaming Providence for saving her from a deucedly regrettable false step and escape from a lifelong misery. He hated a woman to be sharp of tongue. It was bad form, decidedly. Gore would agree with him. He resolved to caution Nathalie on the first opportunity.

But if Nathalie's tongue had preserved its readiness, one talent she had apparently lost forever. Her music was gone. No one now heard her play Bach, like great waves far out at sea, cradling a derelict heart; or those French songs that sang themselves, with eyes half closed in an extase only half waking out of the shadow-region between love and sleep. Once she had seated herself thoughtlessly at the great concert grand piano in the drawing-room and begun a slow Hungarian waltz, suggestive of a dream-touch from hands that never in reality dare caress; but she had played a few bars and broken off, to sit looking down at the keys for long, silent minutes before drawing back her hands like discordant instruments no longer able to summon the harmony of life or sound. Music had become "a mocking god that used the bliss to drive her mad."

Once Lord Gore had ventured to reproach her.

"With such talent as yours, art should stimulate to the loftiest heights," he said, but Nathalie had replied unhesitatingly, "Art lies so! It is so incomparably more beautiful than the truth it is supposed to stand for! I was deceived by art into believing it was an interpretation of a more exquisite reality. I have pierced the sham.

I want to live art, not create impossible rainbows of delusion."

"My dear child, do not make the mistake of going out and trying to live art!" he had remonstrated. "Let art remain an abstraction; it is less disappointing than life and far less painful."

Lord Gore had arrived at that period of experience when reflected emotion costs less than actual endurance of it. He was the only one of her inner circle who ever dared hover closer about the forbidden enigma of her being. Her engagement had been profoundly buried alive by Sir James, never announced formally or informally, and Nathalie hid her soul so skilfully that even Hilary forgot her wayward fancy, and took hold afresh. That he did really believe it was forgotten, or held no more value than a mere spring flirtation, adding a new variety of victim to her count, he proved to her in a tactless jest that she never forgave, because it cost her a flash of self-betrayal. It was during the first autumn after her return from Warsaw that it happened, at a house party where Hilary had been singing his wholly modern repertoire after dinner, winning much applause for his melodramatic intensity. Nathalie had been standing by an open window, half listening to his sentimental strains, half absorbed in the moonlit charm of the park outside. She almost fancied she saw the spectral swans start up in the low shrubbery by the fountain, when Lord Gore's voice interrupted her, asking:

"Do you care for your cousin's music? One finds it a bit banal in the face of such a night," and Hilary, overhearing, had answered for her:

"Nathalie is a great romantic; she likes the Indian

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Love Lyrics best, especially this one," and he began teasingly to sing with mock passion:

"'White hands I loved beside the Shamilar,
Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell?"

Only instead of the original we have adopted a new Russian version," he added, singing with peculiar emphasis, with his eyes always upon his cousin,

'White hands I loved beside the Samovar.'

He was testing the strength of her feeling, of that she was instantly aware. He was experimenting upon her in public to determine exactly how far he might dare to venture in private. Her aversion for the method was evinced by her entire disregard of his joke, though that haunting cry of the refrain,

"Where are you now? Where are you now?"

echoed sorrowful in her dreams that night. Since then she had avoided all music when possible without seeming to do so too pointedly. The opera was of course a mere social function and unassociated with Serge, but orchestral music she fled as from an open grave. Not until the waning of the second season did she allow herself to be persuaded to hear the new Russian virtuoso, who was just then taking England by storm after a sensational success on the Continent. At first she refused, fearing his power to deliver her over to the past. Then the longing to let herself go once more, to imagine herself under the spell of that soul of passion, mirth and tears, possessed her. Like a great Frenchman before her, her heart cried out:

"Let me be weak! I have been seeming to be strong so long."

Whom did it wrong if she chose to indulge herself, reckless of consequence? Who could refuse her if she deliberately purposed to excite every nerve and seduce every desire by the intoxicant of the spirit wine? Why should she go on cowering before an enjoyment that she had no reason to believe would undo her courage? It was quite probable the music of this Slav would leave her unmoved. Ashes could never be flame after the spark was dead, however high blew the wind. If the temporary madness of love was over why should she be afraid of

“two-thirds of love’s delightful things”

besides, pauperised forever for the memory of one spendthrift June? Lord Gore was giving the party and there was no one to suspect her cruel interest in the young violinist. When the night of the concert came she found herself among strangers, with the exception of their host, alone with the spirit of Russia. She deliberately abandoned herself to the luxury of it. The one Russian name on the programme, that sent little shivers of anticipation flying over her, was set below the usual prefatory numbers. She smiled and chatted between each of them, anxious to finish her social obligations before the real forgetfulness of the music began. Soon now she would be in imagination in Russia, his country that he adored, transported by magic of the art he worshipped! It was morbid, perhaps worse, to indulge in the shattered dreaming of a man weak, evil, ruined; a man so wholly unworthy. Yet, like the inebriate, she craved the stimulant that was to bring him near even for an instant of false joy.

Catherine’s letter had been the last blow to her hopes, with its few cold and reproachful lines. She carried them stamped upon her memory—“Nathalie, what have

you done to my brother? Serge has hidden himself in a monastery, his brilliant career ended, his heart broken."

The injustice of such accusation had stunned her at the time. She had written, but no reply had ever come, no forgiveness of the mystery for which she was not to blame.

But now, at last, there was a breathless ripple of expectation. The orchestra drew back to let the great artist pass between. She let her eyes go out to the approaching Russian and drink their thirsty fill of that face with the same brooding shadow of the Slav heavy upon it. It was the same Russian feature and figure, the inimitable blend of haughty reserve and shyness. Every changing expression as he waited brought Serge vividly before her by national resemblance, yet widened the gulf between them by asserting actual individual divergence. The impressive orchestra was solemnly preluding, the hush had fallen while the audience listened for the perfect first note from the responding violin. Nathalie had miscalculated her strength. This bravado of open contact with the spirit of Russia was beyond her fortitude. She felt the overwhelming surge of a rising tide, subduing her. Rigid she sat through the wizardry of an achievement that made London lose its head.

"Brava Klopfski!" "A tour de force!" "Superb technique!" "Melodious touch!" "Glorious freedom!" she heard repeated all about her. But still she sat in a Russian heaven of her own, oblivious to comment or applause: on fire with pride in her lover's people, identifying herself and Serge with this gentle, haughty youth bowing beneath the wild outbursts of enthusiasm. Again and again he was forced to return, nor were they satisfied until he had tossed them a caprice of his own. Again

he tried to withdraw, and again phlegmatic Britain would not have it so. He bowed as if oppressed too deeply by his gratitude, but still he could not pacify them. Then, before the girl with the opalescent face, gowned in frosty white, sitting in the box nearest the orchestra, could steel her heart or nerve her courage, he was already groping in a close harmony, unaccompanied by the orchestra. Already he was in the shadows of the first bars of the Etude in E, the night song of Rubinstein.

It was the call of purest passion to the sacred plighting of their lives, the wedding of their secret souls. When the great cry of solitary love broke over her she quivered and shrank back. Lord Gore was shocked by her tear-wet face, of which she seemed totally unconscious. In the ensuing entr'acte it was he who covered her confusion and drew her attention to himself, that others might not see as he had seen, helping her regain her poise by commonplaces that asked no effort of response. He had never supposed her capable of deep feeling. It had moved him more than she could have imagined or he himself suspected. It had led him deeper into his speculation as to the real nature of this woman he had so especially admired for her external fitness. As he made his desultory remarks to her now he was wondering, hesitating between several decisions in regard to her puzzling nature. And as she listened she was not thinking of him in the least.

To her the heavens had opened and the lightning illumined. It had lifted her over the barricade of Serge's unworthiness to those gleaming spring days at Varsovie; those soft summer nights when the white swans, as gentle apparitions, alone animated the sleeping gardens; when the touch of his lips upon hers had proved the reality of

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their passionate paradise. The associational faculty to which we owe most of the reserve joy of living was playing havoc with her emotional nature now. She was, moreover, obsessed by the notion that in some remote way Serge was directly responsible for her excitement. Else why should a great artist select so simple an answer to the demand of a London audience clamouring for feats of legerdemain? Was it, perhaps, a chance arrow shot in the air at his instigation, sure of lodgment if her soul still lived and loved? She was rapt in her thrilling conjecture. She exulted in that part of the past that was her lover's, spurning the shame of the afterward as unreal, sick with mere longing for his touch upon her, his love within her. The poem of the Georgian expressed it all:

"O Love, wherefore do we desire thy sweet pain, bearing us always but torment after our few short instants of joy! Enemy of repose, vagabond of the human heart,—in thine enjoyment we are inundated with chagrin and with despair, yet all fear thee, all seek thee. Thou art the great mystery of our life!"

As the rest of the evening passed she hardly remembered Lord Gore's presence or noticed his unusually concerned manner. He sat well back, watching her in the approved immemorial way of lovers, unobserved. He liked the profile of her dainty head, with its cloudy hair tilting the chin cut with such clean distinction against the dull gold curtains of the box. Her erect, light figure, suggestive of springtime, was alluring to the wayworn eyes of the Londoner of many seasons. He had faintly surmised the Duke of Merriweather had noticed the patrician quality in her. But His Grace would hardly contemplate an alliance out of the aristocracy, so the possibility of rivalry in that quarter had been dismissed, once admitted. It was something in one's favour to be no more

than a lord of the realm perhaps. One would feel it tiresome to count the effect upon future generations of a tribe of country cousins every time one's fancy was by way of being stimulated by a pretty woman! His Grace was strictly bound to such consideration. What could have affected Miss Mainwaring to-night? She had cried like a little girl. He remembered having seen his niece of seven years cry like that once in the same helpless, quiet fashion because her mother had refused her permission to play with some children of the tenantry beyond the gates of the park. But Miss Mainwaring could not by any possibility be wanting to play with children of the tenantry. What could so have queered her steady nerves? In vain he conjectured. Lord Gore believed he understood women a bit. His own young wife had lived but a few months, to be sure, but she had left a legend of radiance on her wedding day; a radiance that had never faded to the hour when those who had been her ushers at St. Innocents had acted as the bearers of her light, flower-draped casket down those same solemn aisles. It was then, perhaps, no less an astonishment to Lord Gore than to Nathalie to hear his grave voice saying, under cover of many others about them, as the music died away:

"I have a very high regard for you, Miss Nathalie. My esteem has grown in sincerity. My heart is hardly that of a boy, but at least it is guiltless of any profane attachment, nor has my past been unworthy of any true woman's acceptance."

What was this he was saying, as if it merely concluded a lost passage? The girl lifted startled eyes to his intent face. He was not an old man, at most barely fifty. His shoulders were broad and lifted with vigour. The ex-

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pression of his face hinted the ascendancy of spirit more than that of any Englishman she had known. But as she gazed now she perceived that on all sides of his nature he was more alive than he knew and would prove himself capable of far greater warmth than he believed.

"Lord Gore," she protested, as one condemning herself for his mistake.

"It is quite irregular, of course. I apologise deeply," he said hastily. "I meant no dishonour to you, though, by my impulse. I fancied that you being an American might excuse me——"

"Oh, Lord Gore!" she repeated in her distress. Was she never going to be able to find adequate expression?

He laid his hand on hers assuringly. "Only say you will pardon me for taking advantage of you," he urged.

"It was not that I was angry, you startled me, that was all," she stammered in her confusion. "I was so far away just then!"

"Dear child, for you are a dear child to me," he said wistfully, "I did not mean to use your tears dishonourably for my own gain. I have known something of life myself, and that means of sorrow and loss as well. I, too, am alone, and if my instinct to protect led me into an indiscretion of convention, try to excuse me on the ground of an Englishman's natural chivalry toward women."

He tried to speak lightly, but she would not accept the egress he had given her. Disdaining all word-fencing, she said with perfect simplicity, "Why do you suppose me unhappy? I may be an hysterical sort of person, or life may have unmasked in an unfortunate moment."

"Ah, yes, Life is the great masker!" he agreed, "but

underneath it is real in its capacity to inflict pain, and we must take our unhappiness with the rest."

"Ah, yes, it is all so tragic and yet so laughable," she said, rising to go. "This life, with gay little morning hopes and silly heartbreaks over bubbles that disappear, and our great dreams from which we wake ourselves crying. It would be hysterical, or suicidal, if we stopped to care about it!"

But Lord Gore objected to being put aside with an exclamation. Standing beside her he said seriously, "Tonight I only wish to assure you of my most sincere devotion. The rest that I have to say to you must depend upon the consent of your uncle, Sir James Blount. May I hope you will influence him kindly?"

"You are wonderfully kind to me always," she cried gratefully. "You always have been. But I never supposed, I never dreamed——"

"You never dreamed I was not too old to be in danger of falling in love, I dare say!" he admitted without a symptom of chagrin. He was holding her long wrap for her now and very gently laying it about her shoulders, bending a little to perform the graceful act, doing it not with the nervous awkwardness of a palpitating lover, but the perfect touch of the married man at ease, to whom it had been an habitual service, not the celebration of a mystic rite. "But you are not quite like English girls, you know, Miss Nathalie," he was saying. "There is something indefinable about you, rather demoralising to even an old man's calculations—a something finer, a certain generosity of nature, a something promising rare companionship."

His voice was cool, but his eyes melted strangely as she thanked him only by a glance. Was this the im-

perturbable Lord Gore? How the world misconceived him! Yet the more eagerness he showed, the greater grew the distance she felt constrained to put between them.

Sitting in her own room alone after midnight, she reviewed the year with a certain reluctant satisfaction. One result of the trial had been her comprehension that marriage was expected of her, and that through it might come the liberty that meant a form of peace. She was not an artist any more than a *dévôte*. No vocation impelled her beyond that of a loving woman. Lord Gore might easily have won her if she had not known Serge. But to give him, in appearance, that which she no longer had it in her power to give to any man she was far too honest. The Duke of Merriweather was also in her running, by common report. It had mattered little to her of whom her cohorts and legions were composed, provided they remained brilliantly full and of marked repute. Until to-night reason had been making progress. The Duke was over sixty. It was a distinction to be sought by him. It might mean power in many ways. She had recently contemplated such a marriage with diminishing repugnance. That very inclination that would hold her back from a marriage of convenience with Lord Gore would never serve to hinder her there. She had sought to forget in many places on varying terms. In the Alps, high up amid edelweiss and glacier, it had been still beyond her. By Italian lakes, and in Scotch country houses, mid seas of heather, a shadow had walked perpetually at her side. Beneath the giant palms of Nice, in the gold and blue glamour of the matchless *côte d'azure*, she had searched in vain for the little hidden flower of happiness that grows "mid grasses green of sweet content." And

now the second season was drawing to its close. Lord Gore would not consider anything final. She knew he would not allow her to be precipitate in her decision. This cold aristocrat had too plainly shown his capacity for feeling. He wanted her, not a wife. But the man in him, once aroused, would claim the utmost of his own, once won. For her such a marriage was definitely impossible. The more she thought of him the more clearly she saw that he was too potent for such an alliance as she must in time bring herself to share. The excitement of the evening had indeed proved contraband, crying down the voice of expediency lately begun to advise reality in place of the shadow of a broken dream. She had even accepted the bare fact that she must give Serge up. But to-night as she had heard the cry of passion and answered it again she had shivered with repugnance as she contemplated the men whose task it might become to supplant her Cossack lover. Even as Lord Gore had been speaking, she had been contrasting these correct Londoners with Serge in full uniform, glorious, outshining them all; his decorations on his breast, given for bravery in China, in Turkey. Only Lord Gore had seemed unlike the rest. Was that not exactly the reason why she must never be betrayed into marrying him? The counterfeit joy of imagining herself back in Russia had cost her too dear. It had revived all the old rebellious pain. One Cossack superstition she had never outgrown. She still wore the little chrysolite amulet. It was the one weakness she allowed herself to cherish, its thread-like chain passing unobserved beneath other jewels, in full dress. She loved and depended upon the feeling of it pressed against her heart. She drew it from her bosom now and pressed it to her cheek. By day it had been a tangible link between

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them, a proof that Serge had loved her. By night, if it had comforted or wounded—who shall say? If to marry meant to part with it she could not bring herself yet to such a step. Perhaps the little omen really had a charm. It was very feminine to wear it still, after all that had passed, but the thrall of the absent lover is one that passes understanding. To-night she held it close when she fell into a restless sleep at last, only to wake with a sense of desolation crushing her. It had all come back with the music. She lay alone in the darkness and misery of her returning consciousness. Her life seemed suddenly unbearable. She pressed the little amulet to her lips to stifle the moaning that would break forth, and a cry for help was torn from her, passionately piercing as that last high note in a final chord—the one word of her concentrated longing, “Serge!”

It was on this night that the victorious river sang for the last time above the din of the clamouring tempest, Away! Away! Away!

CHAPTER XIX

LORD GORE

NATHALIE's convictions in regard to the determination of Lord Gore were more fully emphasised by the sudden warmth of Hilary and his rekindled effort to assume their old relation of intimate camaraderie, which had never been renewed since her Russian episode. For a year he had rarely been at home, but for the past month he had taken up his residence at his club and haunted the house at odd hours when she was likely to be found without other occupation than his society. He was always dropping in for luncheon or tea, or even breakfast, quite unannounced. His faultless dressing and the exquisite elegance of his personality, diffusing an atmosphere of high breeding and fresh lavender, women might well have envied him. The arching eyebrows that he lifted so superciliously upon the world and his wife resumed their intrinsic charm with her. The cold eyes that were set a trifle too deep for beauty were allowed to soften at wise moments, chosen with a certain knowledge of her sex that cunningly estimated the precise measure of devotion acceptable from him. And if he ever had knitted that high, fair brow of his, upon which the light hair was so exactly parted in the middle, it was never of sufficient duration to plant a line or leave a shadow behind. He was not much of a sport, he confessed, but as a house-mate few men could surpass Hilary. In carpet-knighthood he was beyond reproach. The little intricacies of modern chivalry were his delight. He loved to serve a woman, pro-

vided her service redounded to his own fame, and he could be trusted with every social situation from scandal to Sevres teacups. Neither reputation nor china would ever suffer from any clumsiness of those slight hands that had never earned a shilling. And he never could conceive of such a necessity arising in the world of a gentleman. He held himself in constant readiness now to walk or drive with Nathalie. He was equally happy to play or sing or to read French poetry to her, or just to sit and chat together over the end of the season and the various matrimonial affairs skilfully, or the reverse, manipulated toward a completion in their mutual circle. He broke any and every engagement at her caprice. And by her allowing him to do this he argued that he was daily declaring himself without words and making progress in that he was not rebuffed. If Lord Gore had sacrificed his own chances, as he fancied he had, by a premature attempt to wrench Nathalie's fancy from her Russian lover, surely he owed him a debt of gratitude and would profit by his mistake. Nathalie had rather sought than avoided his companionship of late, perhaps the inevitable reaction had set in. It might be that her heart was hungry for affection, and, denied its prime desire, was opening to other consolation. No woman ever married her first love. Of course she could not be falling in love with Gore—that notion Hilary dismissed as ridiculous on the face of it. He was an old man! Almost old enough to be her father. So Hilary persisted in his well-tempered devotion. He was gentle and fond, and even risked being tender at the right time, and, not being rebuked, had attitudinised very prettily as the cousin-lover may who is privileged beyond the intimacy society permits. And Nathalie appreciated the becoming pose, and understood, and sometimes she

was grateful and looked upon his blonde style of distinguished beauty with approving eyes. But more often she was uneasy under his increasing companionship that asked nothing yet seemed to be suffocating her little by little. She began to dread the summer. That very aspect of her mind alarmed her. She had never dreaded Hilary in the least before. Perhaps it was herself she feared now. But he understood women, understood her probably. He would never conquer, but he might undermine.

"You are restless, dear," he would say, sensitive to her least change of mood.

"And what if I am—what is a woman to do about it?" she would ask in reply.

"Travel," he suggested.

"I have travelled."

"Get a new absorbing interest in your life. Why not a lover?"—impersonally.

"If I were a man I could go off and kill animals, I suppose"—irrelevantly—"a mere woman can't go off to African jungles. She would take cold."

"And spoil the loveliest complexion in London, I should say not!"—in mock horror.

"Besides, a woman cannot do anything alone," with an aggrieved note.

"You would not have to"—with this a suggestive hand outstretched. "There is some one only waiting for you to want him to go anywhere in the world with you!"

Or if she repined over her uselessness, and longed to influence Parliament and be at the heart of great philanthropic movements, he would listen faithfully to her tirade against being nothing but a woman, and remind her at the end:

"But surely, a woman influences most through the

power of her personal charm. If you are not radical enough to join the frumps and clamour for a hearing, you have the immortal possibility before you for influencing me! Take me and mould me! Let me be your philanthropy and social service!"

And to her impatient, "Why will you insist always on being so personal, Hilary?" he replied indifferently, "Nothing interests me in conversation with a woman but '*tu et moi*.' Unless one is talking objectively just to cover one's dissimulation of one's self. Really I don't care of what we talk. It is enough to watch you. I like your mouth and your hands, and when the charm of your voice is added, it does not really matter in the least what you happen to say—and see! I am paying you the only real compliment a man ever pays a pretty woman—I have let my cigar go out!"

And then he would gracefully turn the subject, before she could chide him, and busy himself cutting her new books for her, or arranging with his own hands the flowers he had brought for her private sitting-room—all the sweet, unobtrusive, smothering attentions that he laid over the memory of Serge, as winter lays the snow, soft but so effacing, over the newly dug grave.

Not even to himself did Hilary pretend that he loved her as he loved Coralie, who was an artist in affairs of the heart, however undesirable as a permanent fixture in a man's life. He knew Nathalie's value both to him and to his world. He would never condescend to compete for her on any but his own ground, but he felt assured that he stood there unrivalled and secure.

Going into the library one afternoon to ask him some slight service, Nathalie found it was not Hilary, but Lord Gore, standing with his back to the room, as if

waiting for some one. It was probably Sir James he had asked for, possibly by appointment. She would have disappeared before he saw her, but he had already turned and was coming toward her with an unmistakable pleasure on his chastened face. It warned her instantly of what was coming. She was clairvoyant in these presentiments of late. Lord Gore did not hesitate in avowing his purpose in being there. He shook hands warmly if stiffly, and scanned her face with solicitous scrutiny, while she noticed, for the first time, how well his grey hair became his supreme distinction of feature and carriage.

"So awfully good of you to obey your uncle's request without making a silly delay," he said frankly. "He thought you were in the house, but I hardly dared hope for the luck of catching you disengaged. May I talk to you a little on the spot? Sir James Blount is informed of my feeling toward you, and though he is hardly encouraging, and not at all flattering to my chances, I may say, he has not forbidden my saying again to you, what I have just been saying to him about you."

"I did not receive any message from my uncle. I just happened to walk in here looking for Hilary, Lord Gore," she explained.

"Then I must begin by asking your permission to stop a bit, and consider our situation." She granted it silently by seating herself without more ado. After all, it was a relief to have the tension break somewhere; to speak of all that was following itself ceaselessly round and round in her tired brain. He resumed his place in the corner of the window near her. The light breeze blew in under the awnings, across the nasturtiums, bring-

ing the scent of honey, and from time to time even the hum of a vagrant bee astray from the park gardens near by. Lord Gore remained standing.

"I want to try to convince you that you can marry me," he said without preamble.

"I only wish you could!" she sighed, as if past caring what became of her.

"Of course my age at first seems a barrier to you, but, Miss Nathalie dear, it is men of my age who best value such rare gifts as yours. If my age—"

"No, Lord Gore," she interrupted. "No, that is not a reason."

"No? Then since you have given me your friendship—for you have, have you not?"

"Yes, sincerely and gratefully!" she cried, glad of one answer that could be kind.

"Then I do not ask for anything more yet. I do not even ask you to try to care for me. I will try to earn that later. I only ask you to let me try to make you happy. Something has hurt you and I want to help heal the wound. Of course other men crave this same honour; I understand that your cousin Hilary Blount is one of them. He is in every way a more suitable match for your youth than I, but if you do not love him, although he is young——"

"He is not," she interpolated. "It is just the reverse. Hilary is too old and you are too young—at heart I mean." She made an effort to smile up at him, but it was not a very successful smile.

"You are sure you do not care for him? Please be very honest with yourself, and with me, on this one point," he urged. Her eyes filled with tears. No one but her uncle Jack Mainwaring had taken such pains to

be good to her. She was infinitely touched by his patience.

"No, I am not in love with my cousin," she repeated sadly, "but I am so unhappy, so miserable, Lord Gore, and you have been, too! You understand what it all means! You have been loved, and in love, and have been left alone as I am."

"A life with love in it is martyrdom," he agreed quickly, "but without it, it is——"

"Potato-dom!" she cried; "underground, pulpy, vegetable existence!"

"Then why not leave it and go up in the sunshine?"

"Meaning?"

"By marrying me?"

"I could not do it—I could not! I should have to marry you if I loved you, and have to love you if I married you—that is the Nathalie in me," she confessed.

"And would that be a sin?" he asked, flushing slightly at her inadvertent admission.

"I have no right to," she said abruptly, looking away from him.

"Every woman has a right to love the man she marries—if she can."

"Not if she has loved before. You believe a girl should love only once, do you not, and give all to the man she marries? I do."

"Why, no," said Lord Gore thoughtfully, as if considering the proposition on all sides. "I am rather inclined to support the truism that practice makes perfect."

"But what man would want to marry a girl who had—well, to whom he was not the first experience? Does not every man want to be the first? Would not any man

feel defrauded of the joy of teaching her—of unfolding the mystery of love to her?"

"Why, no," repeated His Lordship cheerfully. "I rather think the horrid little green bud is only good for the worm to 'canker on' in. It has no chance whatever beside the full-blown rose! I prefer them just ready to fall, myself—flaring, so that one gets a glimpse of the heart, you know."

"Did you know I had been engaged?" she enquired, with difficulty but determination.

"My dear Miss Nathalie, I know nothing of your real self except what your friendship has taught me to expect. Whatever your life has been, you had, and still have, an inviolate right to it. Your memories may be as sacred to you as mine are to me. I have been married. You understand what that implies, when the love is a perfect one shared by a man and woman alike. Your past may have been as beautiful as mine—yet here I am pleading to be allowed to love you in a different way, and to have the right given me to place you in surroundings where you can bloom as it is impossible for you to do here."

"Don't you believe in one love as you do in one God?" she entreated, as if glad to get a load off her heart.

"I may believe in it—may have believed it, that is—but my own heart seems to have proved too human to live up to my faith," he said proudly, as if quite unashamed. "It is not an uncommon frailty, even with the saints," he added humbly.

She with difficulty accepted his need of her. He read her scepticism in her questioning eyes and met it openly, saying: "You cannot doubt that you are dear to me. I have avoided forcing my feeling upon you, unwilling;

but even that was for your sake. It surprised me at first quite as much as it has you, no doubt. And if I had not seen your tears the other night I might not have told you for a long time. I might not have really known it myself."

"I could not help it," she said like a sorry child. "It swept over me like a storm. I cannot explain, Lord Gore. I must just beg you to forget it all."

"And if I do, are you going to forget me and ask me to forget all about you, too? Forgetting is twice as hard when one is trying to make the other remember!"

"Oh, what else is there to do?" she cried, with a little gust of protest. "If you knew everything it might be better, but I don't feel I can talk about it; and I have no idea what you would say to me if I did. I am all alone, unhappy, and undecided and pulled all sorts of ways. Uncle Jack is beyond reach and everybody else has a prejudice or a motive behind his advice, and I am tired to death of it all, all the time!"

Lord Gore stood exactly as he had from the first, leaning slightly against the opposite side of the open window. He made no motion toward her, his hands betrayed no excitement. His voice was deep and supporting.

"Would it be any comfort to you to confide in me?" he suggested, after a silent pause. "You could trust me, I should think, and I might be able to help unsnarl a knot for you, or if nothing more, it might be a rest to share the trouble. Please refuse me if you fancy you would regret it afterward," he cautioned, as she leaned forward, about to speak.

She leaned back suddenly, as if the confidential mood had already passed, impulsively as it came.

"You overestimate me terribly," she said. "It is really only necessary to set you right on a few of those sweet misjudgments of yours. To begin with, even Hilary says I am not in the least his ideal. He adores womanly women, supremely womanly women! I am not that, whatever other thing I may be."

"This is encouraging!" exclaimed His Lordship, "for aggressively womanly women with a capital W always did send me out to the club. It is more restful."

"I am not restful, either. Hilary says so."

"Well, no! Rather not, I should say!" he agreed cordially. "You are about as near one's ideal of a cradle song as the Marsellaise!"

"So Hilary thinks."

"Not that I agree with him," he objected; "for you are the real girl Meredith had in mind when he wrote:

'She can wage a gallant war
And give the peace of Eden!'

"I am sophisticated and cynical," she continued.

"And I have always been so grateful that God troubled to refine on mortality until it produced the subtle and sophisticated—even the cynical," he replied. "It is exquisite to hold those luminous qualities before one's attention; they are the moonlight of the wits. The only difference between us, then, is that I am a good-natured cynic and you are a temporarily disillusioned optimist."

"I am not, however, dishonest, especially with myself," she insisted stoutly.

"You had never given me any other impression," he assented warmly. "You wish me to understand distinctly that there has been another man in your life. A man who still stands between yourself and me?"

"Yes."

"Does the situation end there for all three of us?"

"No, not quite. It is not so simple."

"He is not dead?"

"I do not know."

"You still hope?"

"There is no hope."

"There is always hope, even if he is already married, unless he has proved himself unworthy. You would not care for him then—I know you to that extent."

But she had sprung to her feet and was standing before him like a condemned person before her judge. "Oh, stop! Don't say that! Don't! How do I know what I should feel, or what I should do? How does any one know? He is unworthy, as you call it. And I am almost certain I would go to him at any hour in the twenty-four if he came and wanted me! It kills me, but it is true!" She stared at him to see if he showed disgust with such weakness.

"You would do nothing unworthy of yourself," he persisted, without change of inflection.

"That depends on what you call unworthy. To understand all is to pardon all—even the unworthy!"

"In such matters women cannot hazard risks," he reminded her. "In society, you know, the immediate consequence has supplanted old-fashioned ultimate retribution."

"If you said unworthy as you would if I were contemplating breaking the ten commandments, I am not. I should be afraid to. I should be afraid of hell, even if I had the chance to get what I am dying for first."

"That's odd, for there isn't any! You are fighting a

straw man there," said Lord Gore. "It is an exploded theory and it never had a claim to geographical location."

"That is still odder, for I have been there! In my mind, I mean," she said with bitterness. "Though Unitarians believe as you do about it."

"How very extraordinary!" exclaimed Lord Gore. "What a forcible way you American girls have of expressing yourselves!"

"Don't stand there and analyse me!" she begged. "Help me!"—and without a word of further preliminary she was in the midst of her story; all the pent-up torment of her year finding vent at last. He did not speak or move when she was done—hot and tearless.

"And you have accepted this as final, without demanding further proof?" was all he asked.

"What else can I do? At first I hated everybody and wanted to revenge myself upon Sir James. Then I thought the censorship of the mails had played us false, or that the General was jealous for the army, but when the hideous truth came over me, something snapped here"—touching her heart. "You see I might try to love you, I might even be glad to, but even if I had the right, I cannot! For after all I am afraid I should go to him just as the gipsy takes to the road when the spring calls. And perhaps I should be more disappointed in myself if I did not, since I believe in one love, eternally."

She threw up her head as if scorning to hide her weakness and the slow tears forced their way over her white face as she fought to hold the quivering lips firm set. It seemed a strange story. Lord Gore remained gravely intent on its purport.

"Where is your American uncle now?" he asked at length.

"Uncle Jack made a long trip through India and went back to the far East, hoping to keep near my friend, Madame Melyukof, I think. I believe he loved her. Every one does who comes near her. He wrote me from some town in Asia that he had started. He said the men reported her as exposed to every peril. He had not received any of my letters. He was always changing his address. You know how hopeless it is. The important letters never reach their destination and some stupid request to buy a buckle for some one you never saw at home is sure to be the one that does get itself through to the end! I suppose Catherine has told him that I played them false and broke with Serge and now he despises me. He would, of course. I love him for hating me, too. It is the dearest thing he could possibly do! It is no use trying to write or telegraph; nothing gets through out there, and I have no idea where he thinks he is now. In America perhaps. War conditions prevailing in Russia, you see how hopeless it is!"

Lord Gore certainly did see. He would have been less a man than he was had he not seen also the wide gaps left for chance in this crooked narrative. Nathalie mistook his thoughtful weighing of the evidence for commiseration.

"Why does all this suffering have to be?" she asked angrily. "Why does God let it be?"

"Because God likes heroes," he said shortly. "I fancy He respects them more than martyrs."

"I had no idea you thought of such things," she said, surprised. "I never associated you with religion, though you are always so strong and wonderful. Does this explain why?"

"I am not a formalist, but I believe in God," he said

simply. "And I believe in nothing else so much as justice."

"And they have been unfair to Serge from the start," she protested. "If England or Europe ever want a scapegoat, they always use a Russian. If a modern novel needs tartare sauce for a love affair, they make the hero a Russian prince or a grand duke—at least they label him so. No one would recognise him without the label!"

"And so you keep your dream and I keep my hope," he said with a far-away look in his grey eyes.

A long pause followed. Nathalie broke it, saying sadly, "And so you see, my dear friend, I cannot marry you, for if I married a man who loved me and I did not love him, I should be base. And if I did come to love him, I should feel I was base to Serge. I should be disappointed in myself, and that would be the worst that could happen."

"That is where your strength of character comes in," his admiration flashed out in spite of him; but she shook her head quizzically.

"I am not daft about character," she admitted. "It seems a last resort for the disappointed! It is not character—I know it is not. It is Serge. Everything is Serge."

Lord Gore turned away and gazed fixedly out into the street. To some men there is no provocation surer than a woman's stubbornly avowed adherence to another man. To some unreasonable male creatures it is more heady than any purely personal confession of preference. Out of reach, she becomes the one woman he covets for his own, and he, the knight-errant ready to die for his ladye of the castle turret.

"I want to say only this," Nathalie added after a long silence. "Nothing could have separated us finally except just what has happened. Only Serge himself could have uncrowned himself to me."

"I understand you," he said, turning back from the window; "a woman's heart forgives every sin but one."

"A woman's heart forgives every sin to one it loves. It has no antidote for contempt, if that contempt is deserved," she answered bravely, with proud lips and unflinching eyes that met his own. Lord Gore put out his hand. "At least we understand each other; and that I feel to be the only solid basis for an enduring love," he said. "I will not stay longer now. I thank you for this sacred pledge of your faith in me and my devotion to you. It was very fine of you to spare neither yourself nor your lover. It has made me, if possible, even more anxious to win you on any terms—provided they are your own."

The dignity of the man was impressive. As he left her she realised the power and glory of character as it might outshine the most brilliant decoration it lay in the gift of an empire to bestow. This moment, in which she felt she had voluntarily separated herself from Lord Gore forever, was the first in which such an event had involuntarily appealed to her as a catastrophe.

CHAPTER XX

A SATIRE UPON GRATITUDE

IF NATHALIE believed the incident closed, to Lord Gore, on the contrary, it was but the more seriously opened. His next move, after quiet deliberation, was to secure the Russian violinist for his last Sunday evening, one of four "at homes" sufficiently exclusive to be sought by rank and fashion as well as talent of various kinds. It was very short notice, but Klopfsky happened not to be leaving town until the Monday following, and the sympathetic enthusiasm of Lord Gore for his music produced the desired effect upon the musician. Klopfsky declared himself not only charmed to accept the kind invitation of His Lordship, but he would also play if desired, and that with all possible pleasure, as his contract was over and he was released from all further obligation not to be heard in private houses during the concert season. It suited his fastidious Lordship less to have the matter put on terms of friendship, so to speak, but being keen for Klopfsky, he was bound to take him on his own terms. It was at best a blind alley. But the artist was a Russian, and from the chance meeting with him might shine some streak of light for the eyes of the woman he was enlisted to serve in her own way, and at her own time. Improbable as it might seem that in all Russia this one professional violinist and a certain Cossack officer should be known to one another, still Lord Gore knew the world well enough to stake on even

the most improbable chance at a desperate venture. It was a random throw, but he felt it was an effort in the right direction. From it Miss Mainwaring would understand the singleness of his motive. The appearance of magnanimity was no sham. He was genuine in wanting the best man to win. If the Cossack was being unfairly dealt by, no one would take his absent part and champion his cause more stalwartly than his English rival.

He received his guests, when the evening came, with just his usual grave and gracious cordiality; distinguishing no one by an excess or diminution of interest. Yet he felt oddly excited when the Russian had actually arrived, reminding him of his willingness to play later, and bringing with him that nameless charm of a deferential manner and proud reserve so vanquishing by its utter lack of self-assertion. Nathalie had spoken only the briefest greeting to her host. He had soon lost sight of her drifting away on a congenial current, drawn from one room to another of the handsome house by varying escort, under pretext of some welcoming group or noble picture, the diversion of the hour being the underlying motive. She happened to be standing just before the curtains parting the music room from a small sanctum as yet uninvaded by the guests, listening to a long story tediously spun out by a dull member of Parliament, who was visibly elated by making her acquaintance, when she distinctly heard Hilary's voice in the room behind her saying with a restive tone of resentment:

"Why do you insist on bringing it up here to-night, sir?"

And that of her uncle replying, low but impatient:

"I tell you the situation grows critical. It cannot go on so. This affair here to-night is bribery, blatant

bribery. Old Gore estimates its effect on the girl to a nicety. You have no time to lose, I tell you!"

"What could be worse form than to speak here?" Hilary asked wearily. "There will be any amount of sentimental chances down at Wildfell. It is a bit too evident to offer one's self at an evening party, when one lives in the same house with the girl. It looks as if one was in a hurry. That is the casual effect produced on a woman, isn't it?"

"No," contradicted his father, "it is not. The sooner the better! Wildfell needs, and must have, extensive repairs to keep it going for this dilatory wooing you propose to amble through during the summer. Where is the money coming from? Those Australian mines have not panned out as they promised. If you cannot come to the scratch and get the girl away from a pack of fortune-hunters, old men at that, youth has changed its pace since my day, and changed for the worse!"

Still Hilary did not speak, and Sir James seemed to have turned on his heel to leave the room, but must have stepped back nearer his son, to say with finality: "I dare say you are weak-kneed about it, my boy, for sake of some other woman. But there is nothing to be afraid of. There is always another woman in every case like this. I tell you, once for all, sir, Nathalie has got to be brought to book at once. Though you may think, to-night, it is a bit hard on you, you will never fancy how hard it has been on me, or what dangerous sacrifices I have risked to bring this marriage round for you. Do your part now! England expects every man to do his duty, is your watchword."

Nathalie lost the thread of the story to the chagrin of the M.P., and welcomed the Duke of Merriweather

gayly, to cover her confusion; while intent on their own conversations the others in the momentary group melted away into the long hall. Hilary joined them a few minutes later, stepping from the next room with his usual disengaged air. He was always one of the men people asked to meet in society, one of those who, knowing every one, cared to meet no one. Under some trifling pretext she sent the fatuous duke away and stepped back into the empty room with her cousin. Hilary's manner was absolutely as usual.

"Did you want me, dear?" he asked. The eternal question he always asked her in public, as usual on his lips.

"Yes," she said.

"Enough to send away the Duke of Merriweather, and give me a minute all to myself? I am too flattered."

"Yes, I wanted you and no one else," she stated bravely. "The truth is, I am tired, Hilary. Tired of it all—except you."

"That is awfully sweet of you, Nathalie, and I have waited a year to hear you say it." He stood close beside her now. She even leaned a little on him, and he felt that she trembled. Any one seeing them so would have pronounced them handsomely mated. He straightened his shoulders perceptibly, as he turned to her with those deep-set grey eyes as cold as ever, yet not without admiration of her glowing beauty.

"Seriously, Nathalie, why won't you put an end to all this sort of thing?" he began with his customary drawl. "I am handicapped in asking you, on the start, by our outrageous position toward each other and that beastly will. It would be stupid in me to make love to you in the usual break-neck style, knowing how you

feel about all such things just now, and that everything I could say would seem like a mask for mercenary motives. But, after all, pretty Coz, why not? Why should we two not marry and live our own independent lives without being badgered to death half the time about it? Why not? "The spring's a merry ring time, and the end of the season is beauty's harvesting."

He held out his slender hand with the great seal ring, half in earnest, half in play. Hilary preferred comedy in life as on the stage.

"Why do you say this to me, Hilary?" she asked wistfully, her glance noting each faultless detail of his figure and the aristocratic, discontented face.

"Why does any man ask a woman to marry him?" he asked her in return.

"I don't know," she admitted with a sigh.

"Nor do they, at the time, I fancy."

"But you, Hilary?"

"Well, I will leave you to infer all the hackneyed protestations and astonish you with a bright new reason. I want to marry you to put an end to our present relation, as much as anything."

"And I had thought of late that you were really fond of me, in your way," she began reproachfully. He turned from her rebuking eyes, and fixing his own on the marble cupid that adorned the mantle near which they stood, said quietly:

"I am fond of you, dear. Too fond of you to play the part for which I seem to be cast—to act the mercenary lover to advantage. If you are fond of me merely as a familiar part of your life, a sort of useless habit even, why not marry me, after all, and make the freedom we long for possible to us both? I am not much of a pas-

sionate shepherd, I will admit. My notion for us is rather hand in hand than heart to heart, since things have been as they have been. But after all, why not? Why should you cry for the Russian moon? Crying is so bad for the eyes! Especially topaz eyes like yours, that need the stronger lights to make them shine. Every one would be pleased," he continued. "Every one expects it, you know. And as a married woman you would have a thousand added advantages and attractions. It is the married woman who reigns nowadays, and you would have a husband who exacted nothing. So where would the disadvantages come in? I have got to marry somebody, so have you. What could we do better? It may sound a brutally cool proposition for a man to make to the belle of the season, but if you will consider it, I will keep my word to the letter. We will neither of us lie, or pretend. We might even get to care a lot about each other in the end, if we did not have to, I fancy. The French do, anyway. I swear I would never bother you about anything. You are very lovely and I am a man—of course. But I should have no right to be jealous even—unless you gave it to me. You would be spared the marital scenes that customarily ensue when some ass coveted his neighbour's wife beyond the point of propriety. Will you try it? What do you say?"

But she was not deceived by his gallant front. She knew his heart was elsewhere, as her own, but she laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder as she forced him to meet her eyes, while she gave him his answer.

"Don't keep it up, Hilary, please don't!" she begged. "It hurts me to have you try to sophisticate yourself and me. I understand you better than you understand yourself when you talk that way. I see it all, and you

have no idea how sorry I am about it all. I know you would sacrifice yourself to your parents, even to the point of marrying me and repenting at leisure or betraying your bargain through instinct you do not reckon with. I know what love is. I am sure you would try to make affection and good-breeding and duty, perhaps, take the legitimate place of love and passion. But just because I have broken my heart and have no idea where I am coming out, there is no reason you should spoil your life, too. If my hand leaves you cold, there is a woman in London to-night whose faintest touch, or the memory of whose touch even, can thrill you. This being so, it is horrid for you to feel obliged to consider a marriage with me. Marriage is not a contract, however you look at it. It involves a spiritual relation that you cannot bargain about or dissolve at will. I have appreciated how considerate you have been, but I have been convinced of late that chivalry was easier for you as the result of disinclination, and I shall not consent to any further discussion of a marriage between us. I could not live the life you have offered to share with me. Neither shall you! I will see Mr. Leatherby to-morrow morning and have him conclude the settlements begun a year ago. We will have our mutual freedom, but not at the cost of mutual chains."

"Spare me humiliation, Nathalie. In spite of your annoyance I do not see why we should not hit it off together fairly well—as well as most of our friends."

"Yes, I suppose you do think we might fix it up. And the papers would state that a marriage has been arranged between Hilary, only son of Sir James Blount, of Park Lane, Heddon Towers, Wildfell, etc., and it would sound very well, but it would be ghastly for both

of us, however much the world approved, for we know that each knows the other's secret, and perhaps for another——"

Hilary coloured eloquently. He wondered if she knew or only suspected concerning Coralie, if that was what she meant him to understand. Aloud he said heartily: "If it is not the Duke——"

"Oh, not in the least the Duke, I assure you," cried Nathalie, and it was her turn to glance away toward the marble cupid, for Hilary stooped and kissed her suddenly, saying:

"Good old Gore! I am thankful it is to be such a rival, if it must be any one!" He said it with unassumed sincerity. She did not rebuke him, as he more than half expected she might, and the sound of music from the next room warned them to silence.

While the girl listened, rebellion surged hot within her against the irony of her wealth. If she had not been restricted by the terms of the will, Hilary and she would never have been brought to their present pass, so full of degradation to them both. He had been true to himself and another woman all through the ordeal. Of this she was glad to remember. Money again had been at fault in the wrecking of her happiness with Serge. And the consequence of that disaster had ruined her chance of ultimate peace with Lord Gore. Inwardly tense, but with smiling outward composure, she was again forced to sit through the music of the Russian, even to that fatal étude of Rubinstein, that seemed to her like an unlaidd ghost doomed to stalk through the midnight of her memory, until some unguessed act of hers should lay it decently in its grave forever. Lord Gore had no intention of its resurrection to-night, and regretted its addition

to the numbers he had carefully chosen. He gave her time, when it was over, before he brought Klopfsky to her for introduction, and left them alone together almost at once, intent on some forgotten duty of host elsewhere.

Again that light figure, with the heady charm of Russia in its association, was bowing before her. Then the musician and the girl looked at each other with frank curiosity. To her he presented an incarnate possibility. He might know Serge. To him she was simply the most beautiful woman he had seen in England. After the first commonplaces had been exchanged between them, he asked eagerly:

"You care for our Russian music?"

She recognised the national pride with a quick throb, but her answer was non-committal. "All the world cares for it!"

"You like better the modern composers—Tschaikowsky, Rimsky-Korsakow and Scriabine, or the older ones? Our Rubinstein, Mademoiselle, par exemple, you are fond of Rubinstein, or not?"

She imagined he had a reason for pressing the question, but again she eluded the direct answer.

"I have noticed that you yourself are devoted to Rubinstein," she said. "You always finish with him, at least whenever I have had the pleasure of hearing you play, and others who have spoken of hearing you to me."

"But no, that is not my reason," he explained quickly. "I do that for another reason than because of my natural love for Rubinstein—quite another reason."

"A reason for playing the étude in E?" She had asked it now. It was done. What was she about to hear? Something to regret or to inspire?

"Yes, a reason that is also in itself a romance, Mademoiselle."

"Perhaps you will tell me about it. I should be so complimented if you would let me into the secret," she urged with a beguiling glance.

"It is a romance and also a promise," he said slowly; "a promise I gave to a man to whom I owe very much; more than any one else in the world."

"Also a Russian, I infer?" She tried to put the question carelessly.

"Also a Russian, yes. A man who without hesitation sold all he had, and borrowed all he could, to save my poor wife for me, in the misery of our poverty before the world would listen to my violin." He paused with a saddened face, then added with a sigh: "It was too late already to save her, but his sacrifice made her last days less full of suffering. She died in luxury, thanks to him!"

"But the promise?" she reminded him gently, as if to draw him from painful recollections only.

"Ah, yes, the promise; I made it to him nearly a year ago, when I saw him in Moscow. A year? Yes, it was a year ago by our Russian calendar, old style. He asked me then to play the *étude* in each of my London concerts. It was a caprice, no doubt. A fantastic suggestion, for poor fellow, he was mad over some woman in England. Some one who had left him in despair. He was seeking his own death; one saw it in his eyes."

"But why did he make such a strange request? What had the Rubinstein *étude* to do with it all?" Nathalie was conscious of a sharp contraction at her throat, a nervous symptom of intense excitement familiar to her. She hoped he did not notice how strained her voice sounded or her inexplicable eagerness.

"Ne znaiou!—I do not know," he said with a shrug, "unless it was a bit of theatricalism, perhaps, that he played with me to make me feel my debt repaid; or it may be because he hoped the woman who had left him might hear me and be pierced by the sudden remembrance of their dead pleasure. Who knows?"

Was ever a riddle so sickening in its uncertainty, yet so easy to read? Nathalie dreaded to have him stop talking, dreaded lest others interrupt them before he had said all. If she lost him now she should never have an opportunity again to get at the truth without revealing her own part in it. It was the chance she had waited for, dreamed of, lived for—and she owed it to Lord Gore at last.

"What a peculiar idea!" she said aloud. "Where did you say that you saw your friend last?"

"Last?" queried Klopfsky. "Very last time of all in a café at Moscow, one night, I believe, in company with Betty Stheyenne. It was after the opera at least. Ah, Mademoiselle, you must have heard sometimes of our famous comédienne? Our incomparable Betty? She is the veritable Russalka! Hers is the voice, even in speaking, that charms even down to the death. It would have to be a sorrow unknown to the army that Betty could not heal. I have myself never had relations with her, but others have told me many kind things of her formerly. That is, before she lost herself to the fascination that infatuated her with poor Serge Ivanevitch."

It was out at last—the name she dreaded and longed equally to hear. By its mere mention it brought deadly confirmation to her sickened fears. Her face must have betrayed a hint of involuntary scorn, for Klopfsky added hastily:

"Spare your censure of my friend, Mademoiselle. It is not deserved. Light with women he may have been, as what officer is not at some reckless period in his career? But he is of a noble character, and has a thousand good traits. I am myself the recipient of his boundless generosity."

Over Nathalie's memory flashed a reflection of the scorn with which Serge had met her attempt to penetrate the meaning of his transaction with those Polish Jews. Again she heard him say, "It is a part of my mystery. Do not try to understand me." Ah, yes! There had been mystery between them, even then. There always was to be. The mystery of love was Serge's propaganda. Lord Gore professed mutual understanding as his own. But the artist was looking away as if about to excuse himself and she said hastily, to atone for her distraction:

"And so you play the *étude* in recognition of his claim upon you. And where is he now? What has become of him? Does he see your programmes and realise your fidelity?"

"About that there is some mystery, I regret to say, Mademoiselle," he replied, shaking his head ominously. "He is mad, they say. At least I have not heard from him. He left the army. It has even been reported that he deserted. It is a strange story. No one will ever repeat it to me, I can assure you! It is so easy to leave the army in the regular way, and he was so hotly a patriot! It is not to be explained. I do exactly as I promised him; in London I play always the *étude* in E of Rubinstein, 'the night cry of purest passion,' he calls it. 'She will know,' was all he would say. I did not ask her name. Perhaps you may know her? It is all I can do for him now to reach her heart."

"How romantic!" There was a hard ring in the girlish voice now. "And you say no one knows where he has disappeared?"

Klopfsky shrugged again.

"No one, unless it is perhaps Betty. She may have become jealous—women are, sometimes," he added, laughing archly, with a complete return to his original gayety of manner. As Lord Gore returned, the artist gave her one searching glance unlike that of a stranger met but once to meet no more. His next words were unexpected. "You have also the hands for music, Mademoiselle. Is it the violin, perhaps the piano that you play?"

"Neither," she said. "I am not especially musical, unfortunately."

The lie came easily. If he suspected her identity, he was baffled completely. She suddenly experienced a repulsion for the artist who stood before her, and all others of his race. She cast them off and denied them in that one breath. Beside them, distinguished by the comparison, stood this impassive Englishman, clean cut and shining as burnished steel after dramatic paste. Allied with such a man her senses might never hear the imperious call of the blood again, her heart might have its hungry hours unfed, but her taste would always approve and be satisfied. She need never wince nor shrink. The refinement of well-bred restraint made its claim in full and was satisfied as she looked upon him now, with the glamour of Russian deception cleared from her eyes at last. And Lord Gore on his side was made very conscious, during the rest of the evening, of appealing eyes turning to him for shelter, with a new sense of shy delight and bold appropriation. He had risked bravely in

giving her this chance encounter with Klopfsky that might insure his own downfall, through his desire to help her. But his own magnanimity had brought him luck unexpectedly. He knew instinctively that the musician had been a false note in the girl's sacredly cherished chord of association. He ventured an assuring response to the new softness of her glance that hinted a sudden distrust of herself and dependence upon him, out of all the eager ones about her anxious to be hers. Instead of shyness she felt a strange new ease established between them, when on bidding him good-night she perceived how instantly he had accepted the truth of their intensified relation. With perfect composure she remarked her enjoyment of his home and the rare treasures of art collected here to create their own wonderful atmosphere. And with equal frankness he had met her changed attitude toward him, replying, "That is a pleasure to hear, as far as it goes. I am glad if the house pleases you. What it lacks to me you can easily infer, and what you miss in it now can easily be supplied." If he had kissed her publicly he could not have contrived more definitely to assume her proprietorship. Their mutual understanding could not have been more significant had his formal proposal in the library of Sir James Blount been accepted instead of refused on that warm afternoon a week previous. What had happened, where they had drifted, or how, neither could have explained, yet over both had come the final consciousness of everything having been settled, and yet no one of the inevitable words had been spoken.

Lord Gore did so far forget himself as to accompany Nathalie to the carriage, which he would have condemned as out of place under normal circumstances. And he

did say, as he allowed himself once more to touch her hand as it lay upon the window, just as her footman had sprung upon the box:

"It has been such a jolly evening! I shall see you to-morrow at dinner. Get them to let me sit by you, if you will. Please do! And if Lady Janet cannot be coerced, give me a little time directly after dinner. I will leave the men and go up to the library, if you will agree to meet me there."

And she had not refused him, but left him looking younger by ten years, while she drove home alone, carrying before her eyes that vision of his grave face with its expression of wonderful illumination, while over and over her heart justified her to the lost lover, who had plunged her into this second abyss by his perfidy. Of course she had nothing for which to reproach herself, if Serge had disgraced himself beyond recall. Yet the inner voice clamoured—you drove him to it! By not going back you tore out his faith in you and in all women. Women always drag men down! This unknown creature, this Betty, the actress, was she not pawning her soul to pay the price of lost faith in Nathalie Mainwaring? Saving you from degradation to make a sane marriage with a man pre-eminently fitted to make a woman happy? Happy? Well, why not? After the unintentional condemnation of a man like this artist Klopfsky, who had every possible motive to say the best he could of his friend, what obligation toward Serge was there left? Of the radiant creature of fire and dream nothing remained but a deformed changeling. Conscience was silenced and inclination was freeing itself from the fetters of the past, hour by hour. Of the power Serge exerted over her there remained only the inex-

plicable lure of his breathless personal charm. With this, in all likelihood, there would be no future reckoning. So, then, as Hilary had put it, why not?

The footman had stood beside the open door of the coupé unnoticed for some seconds on their arrival at home before she had reached her conclusion and dismissed her misgivings. Thus again one reads the irony of human intention. In Klopfsky's rewarding of the limitless kindness of his friend and patron the final blow was struck to shatter the ideal of the Cossack, hitherto persisting in the love of the woman who had in spirit been already his.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SOUL OF A COSSACK

"Who is coming to dinner to-night?" demanded Sir James abruptly next morning. "Beastly unmannerly of Cloverdale to funk it the very night before. Dam'me if it isn't!"

His lady drew down her face as if in pain.

"Oh, James, if you could only endure my nerves for a quarter of an hour, it would teach you to spare me these outbursts at inopportune times!" she sighed. "I should think that knowing, as you do, all I have to contend with, in the family and out of it, instead of worrying me when I ought to be perfectly quiet——"

"You can be quiet forever after you have answered me who is going to take Cloverdale's place to-night!" retorted Sir James. "I won't have any city chap squeezed in, or any new aristocracy or foreign titles introduced under my nose, even at a scratch!"

"Please defer talking about it until later," begged Lady Janet. "Jackson is just about to bring in my wine and biscuit. It is just eleven, and you know perfectly well how sensitive my nerves are to any break in my routine. My digestion is precarious, as you know——"

"Lord, I ought to! I have my own to go by! Besides, that is just my point," he declared, back to the issue at once. "If Cloverdale cuts out, who is to sit by Lady Betty Milner next beyond me? I only considered her being asked on the expressed condition that

Cloverdale sat on her right and kept her off me. She is not the sort of woman I affect myself, as you also ought to know, if you know anything about me whatever!"

Lady Janet, bent on avoiding the raising of an issue, assumed a martyred expression. "Later, James, later," she began with a tolerable show of firmness, when Nathalie entered briskly, fresh from a morning ride. To her Sir James turned with his grievance.

"Your aunt objects to telling me who is going to take Cloverdale's place to-night," he said, "though what propriety there is in making a mystery of it is beyond me to understand!"

"Your uncle always does insist on opening disagreeable topics when my nerves are most in need of perfect calm," explained Lady Janet.

"One cannot always suspend animation until after the next meal!" retorted Sir James. "She has put on her so-persecuted-they-the-prophets air, Nathalie, and that's the deuce always!"

"How many times, James, have I told you that the doctors have forbidden any excitement before eating?"

"Too often for me to be especially anxious to hear it again, ever!"

But Nathalie laughed outright. "Oh, if that is all that is the trouble!" she cried. "I supposed from your faces that the bank had been robbed or Watson given notice. There is not a bit of need to worry about the dinner party, Uncle James, for I have asked the Duke of Merriweather informally to drop into the empty place." She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone as if she had merely ordered an extra course.

"Oh, you did, did you?" approved her uncle, amused

at once. "And what did His Grace the Duke of Merriweather say to that proposition?"

"He said, 'What, and throw over the Marchioness?'"

"Go on," chuckled Sir James.

"Then I said," Nathalie continued, "'Why yes, I suppose so; that is, if you must, though it is rather a muscular feat, as she must weigh ten stone at least.'"

"And what did he say to that?"

"No dialogue ensued," said Nathalie, swinging her crop complacently, "except that just as I was leaving the park he galloped up and called out to me, 'Expect me, rain or shine!' He really acted as if he thought rain or shine was poetry, or an epigram," she added, laughing at the old man's satisfaction in his ready wit. "At least I am quite sure he thought it was an apt quotation, and perhaps even repartee," she speculated dubiously.

"That is a good one! Dam'me if it isn't!" Sir James exploded, mightily entertained by her rehearsal of the scene and imitation of the Duke's gallantry. It tickled him inexpressibly that the most eligible match in London should jump at a scratch invitation to his board. In his gratification he overlooked the very point of altercation his wife had so nervously avoided—the open supplanting of Hilary.

Sir James had noticed the change in his niece. She had grown cold of late. Something hard but sparkling surrounded her, impenetrable to all alike. If His Grace seriously wanted a Duchess, there was no woman in his own circle better fitted to bear the coronet of Her Grace. Nathalie had preserved her charm unsullied by slander or scandal, thanks to him, and had never bid for popularity, or held it once won, by ostentation or any vulgarity of notorious beauties. Her wit was never risqué

or her choice of friends questionable. In his satisfaction he could not help repeating the salient points of the story to Watson the imperturbable, as he was having his hair minutely parted by that tonsorial artist before dinner.

"That's a good one, dam'me if it isn't!" he repeated in fine fettle. "An Earl and a Lord both lovesick, and both old enough to be her father, in the same running! And for all the grandstand can see of encouragement given them, the dark horse likely to come for the stakes! Eh, Watson?"

"Stranger things 'ave 'appened, Sir," responded Watson guardedly, for it was the psychological moment of the parting, and he could not permit himself feelings on any subject just then.

"You have had the parting too far over on the left side all day," complained Sir James suddenly, warned of the impending crisis in his dressing by the silence of the valet.

"H'excuse me, Sir, I was h'only h'allowing those few h'extras 'airs to the left a little rest h'until evening, Sir, to give a fuller h'aspect by contrast, Sir," he explained deferentially.

"Very good, very good," assented Sir James absently. "You may bring me a mere drop of——"

"Malted milk, Sir? H'exactly; as usual, Sir," for Lady Janet had entered unannounced save by the metamorphosis of Sir James's order by the observant Watson.

The dinner party proved an exhibition of luxurious content. For the first time in long months Nathalie felt herself a little more at ease with the world and fate and herself. England was asserting its power over her a shade more perceptibly every day. The balanced dig-

nity, the regularity of its precisely measured social rhythm, had at last become soothing to her tensely strung nerves. The royal Ascot, the social event that closes the London season, had been run a few days before, and the royal procession that had wound from Windsor to the royal enclosure facing the race course had impressed her doubly. For the four-horse open carriages with postillions, equerries and outriders in royal scarlet of the King's state had passed, leaving her aware that a place in one of those very regal carriages was hers for the taking. The Duke of Merriweather was entitled to it. If one could not be happy in this world, at least one might be exalted! Was she becoming Anglicised? Tonight she did not combat the pervasive charm of it all. That which had oppressed her as too safe and sheltered from real life, that so dull and dear to the British heart, began to appeal to her weariness. The pioneer of emotions was drugged for a time and she was grateful to find the narcotic pleasurable. For a while after the Russian concert her old struggle had been upon her with fiery fang, but the signal had failed on actual explanation with its bearer and her last weak hope had fluttered to the ground. Even Hilary brought tears to her eyes by the patience with which he had allowed her to trample on his affectionate efforts to amuse her. If they all cared so much, ought she not to be ashamed of her contempt for their innate limitations? Perhaps limitations were like barricades, bulwarks as well. She looked from one to another with less critical eyes to-night. She even pitied Sir James for his increasing age, as shown by his fretfulness and tyranny in trifles, and commiserated her poor little aunt for not understanding how to meet him in his bad moods and laugh them down the wind. Lord

Gore thought he had never seen her looking as she did to-night, in a very long gown of golden net that might have been spun from the meshes of her own gleaming hair. A goddess for Phœbus Apollo rather than the mate of a mortal, it seemed to His Lordship, into whose face a leashed eagerness had sprung, as he put his conventional request:

"Am I to take you in, or is it to be the alternative?"

"The alternative," she said, without stress, as if the rubicon had not been contemplated and crossed by the reply.

The Duke of Merriweather had arrived late, after all the other guests, which permitted him his favourite jest with fine effect of appropriateness:

"Better late than never!" he cried jocosely to Lady Janet, waiting with arched eyebrows for the applause that should follow his sally, aware of its having been wittily and beautifully apropos.

Nathalie was taken in by him and sat between him and Lord Rathborne, the latter a devoted royalist, whose padded vernacular made her think of nothing but drawing-room chairs that needed restuffing and a good yard of new damask stretched over the protruding springs. He hitched and jolted through his pompous sentences, responded to by an equally impeded peer, whose argument no one seemed able or interested to refute. Nathalie found herself in every free instant listening to or observing Lord Gore, who had been pressed into the delinquent Cloverdale's place, farther down, by the famous Lady Betty Milner. His voice was mellow as old port; his wit matching his keen grey eyes. She caught echoes of his chat, in which Palmerston, set free from the green covers of MacCarthy's History, became again a boy at

school, a statesman, a peer of the realm, through his lively reminiscence.

Again she heard him speaking of a certain prime minister, who had married to please himself like lesser boys—she was sorry to be interrupted by her neighbour and obliged to lose what he might be saying of love. Lady Betty was leading him on to the top of her arrant bent, and he was committing no indiscretions, but impersonal as Balzac, was revealing all sorts of fascinating secrets of others, she felt sure. They seemed intensely absorbed. He did not once glance in her direction. In the next interval she heard him telling the discomfort of a snobbish peeress, who demanded to be shown her crest among those of the chief justices in the library of the House of Lords, the means of revealing to her gay party accompanying her his disgrace, in four relentless words, "Dropped for taking bribes." This seemed to captivate Lady Betty, who hated the peeress in question, as she frankly avowed, declaring Gore a Love and an Angel for arming her with this avenging tale.

"Are you thinking that Lady Betty is awfully pretty and dressed in wonderful form?" suggested His Grace, following her glance.

"I never trust a man's opinion of a woman's dress," objected Nathalie.

"But Lady Betty is a most sensible person," argued the Duke, whereupon she cut him short, crying:

"Now I am sure of it! When a man tells me a woman is beautifully dressed, I know without looking she is wearing red. And when he tells me she is sensible I can swear she has flattered him. I saw Lady Betty smiling at you not two minutes ago. Besides, women do not think about women in society, unless they are jealous.

What I really was thinking was, that Thackeray was not so great an artist after all. His men lived, and live still, in London, and all he had to do was to set them down any night after dinner."

At the end of the table a dainty, rather washed-out little woman was piping to her host, "If they treated us poor women half so well as they do horses, now, Sir James?"—to which her uncle responded heartily, "I always tell everybody two things are well cared for in England—horses and royalty!"

Next beyond sat Hilary, obviously bored by one of the older belles of a past season, a rather angular peeress who affected sport.

"Do you hunt this year? We may meet for the grouse shooting at Bally Lochcree. You visited Billy MacHintooch in Scotland last year, did you not?"

"I went up last autumn," Hilary admitted. Stopped off in Glasgow, found a dirty inn and ate a dinner off plates that had seen better days—at least preserved a distinct aroma of them—a dinner that, as far as I was concerned, consisted in a bottle of 'polly' water and six crushed strawberries, a duck's leg encased in the fur boots nature gave it debarring closer perusal, and one swallow of a pudding sharp as a razor with poor brandy."

Evidently Hilary was out of tune. Nathalie realised she was not entertaining her Duke properly, and Lord Rathborne turning to them at that moment, she included him as she asked idly:

"I have been wondering lately why should the children of a king go mourning all their days. Has Watts's enquiry ever been answered? Why should one man, even

if he is a king, have acres of elbow-room while little, thin, sick children have not room to breathe? I thought about it all the time at the races the other day, down by Windsor."

Lord Rathborne screwed his monocle in as firmly as if he was about to address the House of Lords.

"It is—er—very—er—ah—rather, don't you know? difficult, my dear Miss Mainwaring—er—don't you see? One is inclined—er—to be thankful—er—that the—er, er—final judgment of us and our efforts—er—will be rather kinder to us—er—don't you know, than—er—our American visitors. They don't—ah—if I may so speak—er, er—understand the weight of precedent, don't you know?"

"We realise how much you have behind you," said Nathalie. "The Russians say they have the middle ages at their back, but they are as progressive as we are in some respects. Our America represents only herself. We are our own experiment, and we must make mistakes when it is necessary for the survival of something astonishingly better."

"We are—er—don't you know, not—er—exactly given to experiments," said Lord Rathborne.

"Oh, no; with you, whatever has been is best. The reason Englishmen are so much calmer than our American men is because from childhood antiquity is your nurse and tradition your playfellow. When you grow up, antique survival is your fetish, and even your privileges are hereditary. Novelty is bad form and adventure is left to the second son or the soldiers of fortune. If I were a man in power I should want to get right down among the crowd. If you were to try it once, Lord Rathborne, and look up at the Government from their

footing, I should think it might give you some astonishingly new points of view."

"I—er—fancy that the Government sees the—er—masses fairly well, don't you know, from above—er—so to speak," said His Lordship carelessly.

"In short, you would personally rather be an equestrian statue than a mere human passer-by on foot?" She shook her golden head reprovingly at him. "There is more of life in the latter, though the former may outlast it. I wish I could make a little speech in the House of Lords. Could you arrange it for me?"

The Duke of Merriweather smiled a rather bleak smile. He considered Rathborne an insupportable old bore. When he harangued the House one could, of course, retire, but when one encountered him at dinner, where lay redress? He rejoiced in Nathalie's disrespect of his well-known conservatism, and was racking his brain for some quotation to throw in as a sort of conversational bouquet. He had not been able to choose between "Silence is golden, they tell us," or "When lovely woman stoops to folly, as the poets have it," when Lord Rathborne remarked with a puzzled stare:

"Now, why in the world—er, er—does a woman like you, a mere girl, so to speak, want to go in for such matters? There are, don't you know, so many—er—prettier amusements."

"Perhaps so," admitted Nathalie with a ghost of a sigh, "but men have all sorts of consolations, and for women no vices seem to be arranged. Heaven is always getting in between us and any really diverting form of relaxation, and luring us to self-sacrifice by golden promises we are not brave enough to disregard. Politics might offer an excitement that was worth while."

"Leave that—er—to the disappointed—" counselled Lord Rathborne. "They may as well meddle—er—if they, so to speak, like—er—don't you know? But it is not for women like yourself—er——"

"How do you know I am not one of them?" she asked.

"Disappointed!" exclaimed Lord Rathborne, allowing his monocle to drop.

"Disappointed?" echoed the Duke, suspecting a joke.

"Yes, truly," she asserted, without a smile for their enlightenment, noticing that at last Lord Gore was listening.

"You could not have been—er—in the, so to speak, nature of the case," protested His Lordship.

"You couldn't have been! There is not a man alive—" began the Duke, bristling.

"It was not a man who disappointed me," she said distinctly. "It was myself."

Both Englishmen began to talk of other matters at once. This had verged desperately near a scene. They had no wish for any indecent disclosures of this pretty American's past. One never knew where it might break out! They were uneasy until they had briskly steered the chat back to decorous channels.

Her lifted eyes met those of Lord Gore. He had overheard her confession.

"I drink to your disappointment!" his own protested, as he lifted his glass to his lips. She did not raise her own glass, but her eyes pledged him. It was almost a betrothal, that rapidly recognised toast. The man was tormented by the half hour yet to pass before he could go to her alone.

At this moment there was a light stir at the wide doorway leading out into the great hall. The Duke glanced

in that direction, and Nathalie, following his impulse half consciously, did the same. The heavy crimson hangings had been hastily parted and at the threshold stood a tall stranger in civilian's dress. The butlers aghast, resentful of their vision, turned as if to remove the intruder. The under footman, who had followed him down the hall, helpless from some inexplicable influence, stood behind him with a face of consternation.

The stranger alone seemed unaware of or indifferent to the irregularity of his procedure. His gaze sought and found. He glanced at no one but the girl in her golden web, sitting between Lord Rathborne and the old Duke of Merriweather.

It was a flank movement so rapidly executed that Sir James, sitting with his back to the door, was unconscious of the incident taking place behind him. One by one the guests saw that something unusual had happened, and inwardly prayed no scandal might be about to be thrust upon them. They burst into a louder confusion of talk to cover any awkwardness, but the absence of the butler from his accustomed place betrayed the situation to Sir James as untoward. It was not the part of a British host to turn from his guests at dinner any more than to fancy his castle likely to be invaded by a stranger. It was borne in upon him that something was wrong—a course misplaced, perhaps; butler taken ill; anything but the real cause. Nathalie felt herself dreaming. The man who stood in the doorway, against the crimson curtains, was Serge. . . .

Serge, a mere shadow of his brilliant self, but the soul of the Cossack compelling and unchanged. She had never seen him out of uniform before; she noticed how his hand sought in vain its usual support upon his sabre hilt now,

She had known him less than a month, believed him false beyond extenuation for more than a year. It was the proving instant of her life, this moment now, the moment in which heroism or cowardice was to weigh the cumulative worth of character before the world. All eyes were turned upon her as without one breath of apology or explanation she rose and tottered to him.

His arms received her close, and she alone heard his hoarse whisper of passion:

"I have spoken to no woman but the Mother of God since I lost you and took my vow until this instant."

Then between them and the diners the curtain fell. He drew her away, and still with his arms supporting her, she went with him down the hall and out to the cab in waiting, only the light lace he drew over her shoulders to protect her bare neck from the summer night. She did not ask him where they were going. He did not explain. Between them there was that primitive passion that does not count the cost or reckon with tomorrow. When the cab stopped, he led her by a side entrance into one of the quiet suites of the Hotel Cecil. The door closed upon them, leaving her not yet the flaring rose to the amorous bee, or within the sanctuary of a lover's worship, but to the affectionate embrace of her Uncle Jack Mainwaring.

Then something blinded her, the lights flared up and went out, and she dropped insensible.

"She is dead!" Serge whispered.

"No, joy does not kill; she has only fainted, God bless her!" Mainwaring assured him.

The night in Park Lane was sleepless. Owing to the ready tact of Hilary, the interruption of the dinner had

been smoothed over by interpreting the apparition at the doorway as a prodigal American brother, unexpectedly returned. Lady Janet had for once controlled her nerves and risen to the emergency, giving the signal for leaving the table only a few minutes before time, and the men, left together, had talked on more interesting topics. The party broke up early. The only one of the guests who knew the real import of the occurrence was the lover from whose lips his cup had been dashed as the very hour of his triumph was striking.

The anger of Sir James Blount was only exceeded by his gout.

"Bolted! Actually bolted!" he exclaimed over and over again. "Beastly vulgar exhibition! Dam'me if it wasn't! After all my kindness to her too! Deuced American ideas of freedom and all that sort of notion at the bottom of it!"

His brother-in-law, arriving in the midst of such outcry next morning, contradicted him flatly where he stood; having no mind to be seated, or to remain one moment longer than necessary to accomplish his errand.

"Nathalie has not bolted," he repeated. "She is with me, under my protection, where she will remain. But I tell you frankly, Sir James Blount, that it is no thanks to you that she has not. She might be on the road to Mandalay by this time but for my chance meeting with her Russian last night in front of my hôtel. All he had to do, was to say, Come! You saw how she answered. She went. It was stunning of her! Any right-hearted woman who loved a man more than life and death would do the same, thank God! I came here with him, last night. When we found a dinner party on, I told the footman we would wait. He recognised me as a member

of the family easy enough. After he had left us, I sent Serge to the dining-room. It was a stiff test. If she came when he called her, I was pledged to see them through to the end. Our American platform is—my country right or wrong, but anyway my country! Nathalie is an American citizen, after all. I knew the stuff in her and she did not disappoint me!”

Sir James, livid with rage, was about to defend his own notions of propriety when Mainwaring stepped toward him with a fixed determination shown in his thin lips. “I did not come to talk. I came to do an errand. I would thank you to give me their letters. Then I will get Janet’s maid to arrange what is necessary for Nathalie’s immediate use.”

“Letters? What letters?” from Sir James.

“All her letters from Serge that you must have suppressed.”

“Do you dare to come here and insult me in my own house by suggesting——”

“No, I do not dare to stop long enough now, I should merely take legal steps at my leisure.”

“By what right, pray?”

“Oh come, James, drop that tone and talk business. I have done about everything else there is to do for Serge and Nathalie, and I want to finish it up clean. I told him to bring her to me and I would attend to the rest.”

“It is a deucedly queer rake you pick up to marry my niece to! Dam’me if it isn’t!” swore Sir James. “Perhaps you would like to hear a few facts in his case, before you are off to a magistrate with the precious pair.”

Mainwaring showed a stolid patience under exasperation, as he folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “I suppose you have got to hear the whole story some

time," he said, "though I hate to spare the time now. When Colonel Krasemskin and I ran across each other out there in that hell at the front, we had nothing beyond the luck of war in our minds. When my object in being there ceased, and he was shot half to death and sent back mangled on sick leave, I went with him—for sake of a service he had rendered me—a service such as men never forget. I swore I would take him back, or his corpse. Sometimes I thought it was going to be one, and more often I expected it would be the other. Well, by hook and by crook, by train and by stopping weeks at a time for him to come to life again, I got him back to Warsaw. He was the only one of his battery that did get back, dead or alive either. When we got there, my first enquiry was for Serge. I began at the waiters of the Bristol who used to know him, and asked on up. The story I heard at the English consulate was only mildly modified at our own, where there is a new consul, a raw young chap I never saw before. It was a blow clean between the eyes. But no fighter lies down when he is knocked out the first time. An American takes that as a sign to get up and take another. I worked out all the threads I could get hold of, and waited and hoped, and at last I told Krasemskin the whole outrageous make-up that was worrying me. I felt I ought to go straight to England to find Nathalie, and yet I felt a greater obligation to the brother of that dead woman, who would have cared more for his honour than for her own eternal salvation. I was afraid to tell my sick man at first, he was so devilish light-headed when he found his own girl was missing out in the East. I thought perhaps he did not understand me, but at last he asked, 'What date did you say that infernal supper at the Europäische Hof

was given?' and when I told him he lay back on his pillows, counting on his shaking fingers till I thought he was off his silly head again. It was all a decoy, James, as you have probably imagined before this. Circumstantial evidence plotted with you very plausibly. But Krasemskin was in Moscow with Madame Melyukof and her brother, on the very night you have condemned him for taking part in that disgraceful brawl. It was August nineteenth. We can prove it all, because it was the anniversary of the sister's marriage and they celebrated a service for it, at the church of St. Basil, in the Russian style. They left Serge, when the night train pulled out for Siberia, and whatever became of him after that was the result of your infernal interference between him and Nathalie. There was no brutish indulgence on his part to exonerate you. And Nathalie knows it now, not only from me but from Krasemskin. We could not get any trace of Serge, so with a temperature of a hundred and three, that brave chap insisted on coming with me to London, and we met the shadow of a once brilliant cavalry officer right before the door of our hôtel. He is a fatalist, and I was, when I saw him. He had written again and again, so had she. Kindly give me their letters. It is due them both that the cloud be lifted between them forever. But for the mercy of a chance encounter between myself and a stranger out there at the end of the world, there would never have been any way of proving his innocence as long as they lived to suffer from it."

Sir James was an image of silent frenzy. He would have spoken, would have interrupted angrily, more than once, but Mainwaring gave him no opportunity. His level voice never paused till he was done.

"I forbid your taking the girl from my house!" thundered Sir James. "I will refuse my consent! I am her legal guardian! Remember."

"As to that, you are too late, brother James. I happen to have a friend with a good deal of influence in high quarters. He married them this morning at ten. Bless them! The irregularity of the license he promised to fix up for me, to every one's complete satisfaction."

"Mere farce!" gasped Sir James.

"It is legal enough to satisfy American demands, I guess," said Mainwaring curtly.

"He would see to it she could not get out of it!" sneered Sir James.

"Not a bit of it! 'Make it so she can leave me if she will, but so nothing can ever part me from her' was all he said."

"What a beastly compromising melodrama for a decent family! Dam' me if it isn't!"

"What else was there to do, James? Who would marry them? What church would sanction them? And man to man, I ask you, if the woman you loved had been stolen from you, and you had found her, would you have risked losing her again? No, sir! not if you were a man! I would not, and this Cossack would not, and what is more, Nathalie in her senses would not be parted from him for an hour."

"And now I fancy you are counting on my forgiving her, and finishing it out like any low third-rate farce in a people's theatre," sneered Sir James.

"On the contrary, I want of you only what I am going to have, those letters. You have done about all you could to blight their lives and ruin their morals. If you had let them alone, and cut out all your insular ideas of

propriety, Serge would have retained his honourable command, and she would have been happily married long ago, with a child on her knee, and no scandal to face ever after."

"In savagery!" growled Sir James.

"A woman's children are never savages to her. But in spite of all your connivance to separate them, these two young hearts are going to be happy. You and the English lion can go and lie down in the corner, once for all. They are coming home to God's country with me first, till Serge gets his health back—which is no small proposition to put up even to the California climate. Then they may go where they please."

"They will bring up in a circus, I dare say!"

"It is refreshing to witness a little natural feeling," observed Mainwaring. "I have not felt so young since I rode a broncho bare-back."

It was an obstinate struggle, but he got the letters at last. Once they nearly came to blows, when Mainwaring remarked, "You may give me the telegrams, too, please, and that registered letter, for which you signed."

At last he had them all. Sir James fumbled the situation hopelessly, torn between his anger and his desire not to lose Nathalie from the family exchequer. His opponents had not played his game as he had calculated, in the least.

"You may say to Nathalie that what Leatherby did was done for her good," he suggested feebly, as Mainwaring was leaving the room with a curt good-morning.

"Bosh! You did it for Hilary's good twice more, and much may it profit him!"

"I repeat, you have my permission to say to Nathalie

that I forgive her, though I have no immediate desire to see her," he said loftily.

"That is doubly fortunate, as I doubt if she forgives you. Serge's health is broken. He told me without pretence last night, 'I have but two careers open to me now—death or Siberia. I shall not be permitted even to die at the front. But 'tis all the same to me if I have seen her; without her the end is no matter.' They will travel, but he will always be an exile, which is a hot iron in the side of a man who loves his country as he does. And of course he is excommunicated from his church. He will not care to meet his countrymen abroad either, it will involve too much shame and regret. Nathalie will give her whole life to making it up to him, but it is easy to see what a broken-winged future you have made for them. Do you know your Browning?" was the parting shot, with the door already ajar, "if not let me instruct you—

"It's a dangerous thing to play with souls!"

Left alone with his gout, while Mainwaring completed his task with his sister and her maid on the next floor above, Sir James was ill at ease. It was imperative not to admit a quarrel with Nathalie or her fortune. He rallied from his discomfiture sufficiently to overtake his brother-in-law on the doorsteps, offering with a fine show of magnanimity to accompany him. He was too much impressed by his own lofty spirit of conciliation to notice how indifferently it was accepted.

His reception at the Hotel Cecil was not encouraging. Nathalie put both hands behind her as she arose and faced his bungling attempts at playful reproach. She would have none of his ponderous overtures and cut him

short, saying, with a glance at her dear unopened letters still in the hands of Uncle Jack:

"It was not difficult to cheat a girl under your own roof and in your own protection. It was so easy that it never once occurred to me to believe it possible. You see, I trusted you. I may forget it—if Serge fully recovers his health and spirit—but I hope I have too much character to forgive such unfair play! But for Uncle Jack, I should have been mid-channel to the continent now, beyond social recall. You could never have spoken my name aloud again. I told you I had nothing but contempt for the woman who counts the cost. You knew I would go to Serge when and where he willed, in spite of every obstacle. I had told you only Serge could make me feel the inevitable claim upon me, and only Serge could uncrown himself. You would never have dared to play with lightning or fire, but you tampered with life and love until it was almost too late!" She controlled herself with a visible effort, and continued with an unbroken voice: "I understand your sudden willingness to pardon and forget. I have authorised Mr. Leatherby to make matters right for Hilary. I want to do it for him. He may want to marry some day without your consent. But of course, after this disrespect to you, Sir James, you can do nothing but cut my acquaintance. I owe it to myself to tell you how heartily I despise you!"

"Nathalie, Dushenka!" It was the gentle entreaty of Serge restraining her, imploring. "Let us not cloud our love by bitter reproaches or evil curses! Perhaps he was right to protect you from a savage Cossack. A Cossack is a robber, you know. I am of that race. Their blood is mine. I stole your heart from this

cousin to whom it was tacitly pledged, I stole my service from the army of Russia, I stole my soul from the church, where I had pawned it in the first mad misery of my despair, after your silence had driven me out of my senses. But from it all I have found there is something stronger than the Imperial Government, higher than the Tsar, more sacred than the Faith of my ancestors—Love! Then, do not blame him, darling, do not make me suffer by seeing you also enter upon a feud with your own blood!"

Instantly she saw how the estrangement from his own had cut him. Henceforth his will was to be her life motive. As she hesitated now, he took her hand in his, urging in his low persuasive voice, "Forgive, Madonna, I have so much need of forgiveness!"

Then with his hand still clasped in hers, she extended the other to Sir James, much as a sovereign might have deigned to pardon a condemned criminal.

"Since it distresses Serge, Uncle James," she said, without pretending to much personal relenting, "we all have so much to learn of wisdom and beauty from the soul of my Cossack!"

After his departure, they took their wedding feast together, they three alone, before leaving for their American ship at Southampton. It was Nathalie, who suddenly blinded by tears, expressed what was in all their thoughts.

"If Catherine could only know!" she cried. "But she died believing ill of Serge, and it was all my fault."

"She knew, Nathalie moya. I was with her that same night in Moscow. I was never in Warsaw after she left me. Never once; she knew it."

"Even when her terrible letter came, I was glad she

laid the burden of all the wrong upon me," protested Nathalie. "I was thankful she did not suspect you, as I did, and that she was spared the joy of loving you, and only thought me unworthy. I was grateful for that deception, at least. But I wish she knew!"

"She does know, Beloved—she and her Dimitri," he said, soothing her gently, as if she had been a child.

"It was your young captain, who loved a red cross nurse, who put me on the right track," said Uncle Jack. "Poor chap, he had never loved anything more than his big cannon before, but he was daft over that plucky nurse. He is a brave boy, a loyal friend! He told me of meeting you and your sister in Moscow, the night she left for the front. He had no idea of the importance of that meeting for me. And it was again Krasemskin who was with your dear sister when she died, hit by a random ball." His voice faltered, but as both Serge and Nathalie were reverently waiting, he continued, "Krasemskin held her in his arms to the end. She died blessing you both, without a pang. I would have given the rest of my life to have been in his place," he added, with dry lips, blanching suddenly under pressure of his sorrow and restraint.

They spent their first winter at Algiers in a dazzling white villa beneath stately palms. To the divine justice done the Cossack at last, Lord Gore had said "Amen"—without flinching. But if while he hoped, he feared—now that hope had ceased, life had invigorated him by a vague premonition of delayed award. In this youth held him within the enchanted ground from which a lover ever beholds a lure upon the horizon of his inner vision.

Serge is writing plays, and political pamphlets whose military insight may one day give him his passport to his native Caucas. Nathalie is his adoration, his God, his heaven. He is never away from her, and even his most serious writing is done with her sitting near him, or flitting about him, filling the Russian vases with those heavy-scented tropical flowers they love. To her, every hour is a passionate expiation for having doubted his faith. Sometimes it seems to her, in a terror of apprehension, that the shining blade of his spirit is cutting its way through the scabbard.

"I have forgiven everybody," he says, "and I am almost sure God has forgiven me."

But though this is peace, he is a soldier. The glory of their first flame has burned to the blue of altar fires steadily alight, but it mounts higher, whiter, purified by suffering and pardon. To-night, as the evening sky is rose-coloured over the desert, he lays aside his pen, and drawing her close, closer, murmurs all the words that best express her, and yet leave her all untold by comparison with the longing of his love. Together they watch the deepening flush.

"My Miracle, my Princess of Dreams, my holy Madonna, how did God even in His Paradise conceive you?" he asks, holding her a little way from him to look into her eyes; the old radiant smile illuminating his wondering gaze.

"Only in the soul of a Cossack," she protests, as again he draws her swiftly into his embrace, whispering, "With you my days are paradise, my nights—" but speech is lost to them in their long kiss while the first gold star pricks its way through the Eastern night above them.

"Do you love me as well as your Russia, Serge?" she begs, at last, voicing her only secret unrest.

He closed his eyes before the answer: "I find my Russia always in your arms!"

Fate had gambolled hotly for him. The army claimed him, Love threw for him, the monastery had won him and lost him in turn to Life. Was Death so soon to sweep him from the board? Or was Love, that hath dominion over all, to redouble the stake for the soul of a Cossack?

THE END

Press Opinions of Mme. Bianchi's Other Books:

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